

The scene is set in New York, one sultry summer, but the real arena is the soul of Dr. Arnost Malik, the Czech-born psychiatrist. Malik is approached by a certain Colonel Howard and offered an enormous sum to cure 'Alfons', a highly skilled agent who is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He is warned that the Soviet Intelligence will send bogus patients to his office to discover the identity of 'Alfons', and that the Western Powers will allow this to happen so that their own counter-espionage agents, also masquerading as patients, can observe the rival organisation. Malik disobeys instructions and is at once plunged into a world so confusing that his sanity is threatened—a world that disturbingly mirrors the psychological horrors of our own 'cold war'.

THE MIDNIGHT PATIENT

Books by
EGON HOSTOVSKY

**LETTERS FROM EXILE
SEVEN TIMES THE LEADING MAN
HIDE AND SEEK
MISSING
THE MIDNIGHT PATIENT**

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by

EGON HOSTOVSKY



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*Because thy rage against me, and
thy tumult, is come up into mine
ears, therefore will I put my hook
in thy nose, and my bridle in thy
lips, and I will turn thee back
by the way by which thou camest.*

ISAIAH 37:29

CHAPTER ONE

THE drama began early in July 1900. That year several very steamy days followed one upon another, and my apartment on Madison Avenue felt like a boiler room. My feeling of fatigue grew heavier hour by hour. Helen seemed to postpone our trip to the country almost intentionally, saying that she had a number of small matters to attend to. The humidity and the heat apparently affected her too. She was irritable and sarcastic, and in many ways made it clear to me that she was busy, that she had her own things to do and her own plans, while I abandoned myself to apathy.

But it was not apathy that caused me to close my office. For the past several months I had been unable to devote myself to my patients, who were decreasing in number, anyway. I suffered from a sort of degenerative fatigue in my limbs, and all my senses were painfully blunted. I slept badly, ate little, and smoked a great deal, and my thoughts revolved monotonously about a few themes. My strength ebbed as though I were somehow bleeding internally. I was unable to concentrate on a single impersonal problem, and any digression from my egocentric thoughts required an immense effort.

At first I told myself it was merely age catching up with me. Then I believed that I was falling prey to my unsettled and insoluble relationship with Helen and my concern for my mother. And finally I told myself nothing, and wandered about within myself as a tramp wanders in the rain, unable to find a decent shelter.

I visited Helen in her apartment each evening around

six, when she got home from work, and I went to see my mother for dinner two or three times a week. Somewhere deep in my heart I believed that my difficulties would all clear up, a dawn would break, if only I could talk about myself with Helen or with my mother as freely and spontaneously as my patients used to talk to me. But I did not know where to begin my confession in order to interest Helen and my mother. And on the other hand I did not know the answers to precisely those questions which both women considered fundamental and which they avoided more for fear of upsetting themselves than from consideration for me.

Helen would find herself again if I wanted and dared to tell her when we would be married, and my mother would feel younger and happier if I were to tell her that nothing prevented her return to Czechoslovakia.

At that time I saw absolutely no one but Helen and my mother. I had never had many friends in New York, and even the few I did have forgot me unbelievably quickly when in my melancholy I ceased to seek them out. Nowadays, when people forget so rapidly, the deceased are as dead after two days as after a decade, and a living person who retires into solitude suffers much the same fate in the memories of what might be called his survivors. From the moment I closed my office the postman had brought me only small bills, and when the telephone rang, I could be quite certain that the caller had the wrong number.

In my confused state of mind I had a singular relationship towards the two people who remained close to me. To be sure, I liked them; indeed, I thought of no one else. But I could hardly say that I looked forward to seeing them. Whenever I rang the bell at Helen's or my mother's apartment, my heart contracted. It was easier and much more pleasant to dream of Helen than to talk to

her. And it was safer to sit quietly with my mother at twilight with our memories than to talk with her, whether at random and on insignificant topics, or on serious and important matters. I found it particularly hard to bear my mother's habit of philosophising and making wise sayings of all sorts.

I cannot say that I suffered, for all problems and worries had ceased to give me a feeling of urgency. But I was not so apathetic that I failed to observe what went on around me and within me. My numbness lay in the fact that I had no influence on either the development or the resolution of the drama of my own life, that I had changed from an actor to a spectator.

I wandered about New York, from cheap restaurants to bars and from bars to movies, wherever there was air-conditioning, wrapped up in myself and bored with my own monotonous spectacle, and all the while observing with growing anxiety the passage of time, time which ended each day when I met Helen.

There were moments when, in the middle of ill-tempered reproaches, scoldings, and previously prepared quarrels, she would unexpectedly throw herself, in tears, into my arms, kiss me and stroke me, and draw me over to the couch, where we would lie for a long time in a convulsive embrace, without making love. At such times we stared into each other's eyes gently and sadly, seeking some redeeming word which would free us from our reticence and would kindle passion in the embrace of our limbs. We had long since ceased to be lovers.

Suddenly everything around me and within me changed beyond recognition. Most people claim that the great events in their lives are preceded by a sign, or at least by a premonition. I cannot say the same for myself. It is perhaps the will of Providence that the spirits which weave

the fabric of our destiny should creep after us on cat's paws.

I cursed out loud that day, when about nine in the morning I went out on to the sidewalk from the dimly lighted hallway of the house in which I lived. Not because someone stepped rudely in my way, but because that familiar sticky heat was sneering at me, heat from which one's first idea is escape until he realises that any attempt to escape is useless. The man standing in my path was apparently not offended, since he added his own curse to the object of our common annoyance:

"You're damned right, it's lousy weather! You boil and fry in it all at once—— Excuse me, aren't you Dr. Arnost Malik?"

Astonished, I turned my head to look at this man whom I had intended to avoid. I stopped suddenly in the middle of a rapid stride so that for several moments I stood on one foot.

"Yes, my name is Malik."

"How do you do. I'm glad I finally caught you. I'm Colonel Robert Howard."

He was tall and thin and his hair was grey. His lips were thin, and he had an aquiline nose and a long neck. His neck and large, dark eyes with wide, bristling eyebrows were his most striking features. I do not remember when I have seen anyone with such an expression on his face; it was a mixture of watchfulness, self-assurance, and something resembling scorn. The man's jovial voice, vigorous and straightforward, contrasted with the expression in his inquiring eyes.

"How do you do, Colonel. I hope you don't come as a patient; I haven't been practising for several weeks."

"No, I'm not a patient, Doctor," he said slowly, extending a hand with long, thin fingers. "I've been sent by the

Psychological Warfare Institute, where I work. You sent us a most interesting proposal."

I began to understand. Somewhere, in the depths of my dulled senses, a spark flashed.

"For God's sake, that was almost a year and a half ago!"

"You must forgive us, but we couldn't deal with such a remarkable proposal any more rapidly."

He spoke convincingly and apologetically; nevertheless, the strange smile which formed the wrinkles about his eyes into the shape of a fan gave his gaunt features an expression of exaggerated irony. I became extremely curious to know what he wanted. My first feeling, one to which I was no longer accustomed, was of happiness. Happiness at any change in the monotonous passage of endless time. I was pleasantly intoxicated by the prospect of something new, unexpected, something which would liberate me from myself.

"Look, Doctor," Colonel Howard said in a fatherly tone, "first let's find some place where we can chat quietly. We've been standing here on the sidewalk a little too long, anyway. You don't have anything important to do till six, so we have time. Please be my guest, and I'll choose a nice place with air-conditioning."

I did not miss in his kindly voice the astonishing fact that he knew what I did each day, and that he also knew whom I visited every evening at six. But instead of being disturbed, I felt a quiet, happy laughter inside, coupled with enthusiasm. I relaxed, looked thankfully into Colonel Howard's eyes, and winked at him boyishly, as though I knew perfectly well what he was up to. He returned my knowing wink, took me by the elbow, and carefully led me away from stagnation and death to the places where life throbbed.

We went only a short distance. We walked in silence, and I remember that the Colonel looked back several times, as though he heard a familiar voice. In front of the café, which I had never been in before, he stopped and looked carefully about in all directions before we entered. The café was done in a sort of European style and was called, I believe, the Eldorado. There were only about five restless customers, who soon left one by one. The service was entrusted to three waitresses of uncertain age, not one of whom had received her fair share of beauty, and still less of good humour. Apparently the morning customers were not very generous when it came to leaving tips. The walls were hung with posters advertising coffee, tea, whisky, Jewish wine, and other beverages whose excellence was proclaimed by pictures of elegant men fully dressed for evening parties and elegant women fully undressed for evening parties, with ravishing, if somewhat stupid, smiles. Otherwise the place was soothingly cool and quiet.

"It seems to me," the Colonel remarked, "that the texts of American advertisements are often more refined than those of American detective stories." And without asking what I wanted, he ordered orange juice and black coffee for two. He devoted all his time to a careful examination of the posters on the walls. Nor did he interrupt his examination even when his incisive voice, which seemed to be designed to frighten away ghosts, uttered a sentence which caused my breath to stop and my heart to contract.

"I have a system, Doctor; I usually start at the end, and so I'll tell you right away that the Psychological Warfare Institute is prepared to buy your proposal for twenty thousand dollars, provided we can agree on a few details which are directly or indirectly connected with your plan."

What happened then occurs only rarely. Three words, out of the whole sentence, did not die away, but hung in

the air and echoed to all the corners of the earth. With each second the roar of those three words grew louder: twenty thousand dollars! TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS!

One hears it said that in the moment of death a man lives through his entire life once more. I do not know, but I doubt it, and the dead cannot tell us. I can testify however that, stunned by the Colonel's fantastic words, I flew rapidly—perhaps for only half a minute—headlong, in mad excitement, down the ghostly highways of the past, which were lined on both sides with thousands of pictures of my life. It was as though all my remote feelings and vague dreams, from childhood to old age, had come to life in an instant and had drawn into their resistless swirling the images of people, places, and things of long ago. I bit my lip because my eyes had filled with tears and my heart ached from too much emotion. Nor did I wish to fall from my poignant flight on to the firm soil of the present. I no longer heard what my host was saying, and for a moment I was not aware of where I was or who was sitting next to me. It required considerable effort to rouse myself from my deep reverie. Psychological Warfare Institute . . . my proposal . . . twenty thousand dollars . . . Colonel—what's his name? Howard—Colonel . . . Colonel . . . Is he actually wearing a uniform?

I had concentrated my attention so exclusively on the face and words of this messenger of good fortune that I had not even noticed how he was dressed. He was not wearing a uniform, but an old-fashioned, wrinkled grey suit. It was too large for him, giving the impression that its owner had recently lost weight. And the man's giraffe-like neck was ridiculous, bobbing in and out of his collar as though on springs. What will Helen say when I tell her what has happened? But is any of it true?

"I am somewhat stunned, Colonel. I had completely forgotten about giving the Psychological Warfare Institute any proposal. Are you acquainted with it yourself?"

"Only superficially. First it was studied by our physicians, then by the radio specialists, and finally by us soldiers. I have a general idea what it is all about, but I do not understand the scientific and medical aspects of your idea too well. But, Doctor, I wish you would realise from the beginning that we are more interested in the concrete applications of your proposal than in the plan itself. In other words, at this moment we need you more than we need your original idea."

His affable voice contained not the least trace of irony, and in spite of this I blushed at certain words, such as "the scientific and medical aspects of your idea" or "your original idea." And then the sarcastic smile flitted about his eyes and mouth again, and annoyed me.

"My idea is in no way original, nor do I consider it a scientific discovery. I have done work from time to time for the Psychological Warfare Institute, and I have written several papers which they asked for on the mentality of Communist youth, on Stalin's thinking, on the psychological background of party discipline, and so on. The Institute gave me a lot of material to work from, Czech newspapers, magazines, recordings of broadcasts on the Prague radio, and a pile of Communist leaflets. And in going through all this material, I hit upon something which is really pretty obvious."

"Yes, it really is obvious," Colonel Howard agreed, and, opening his mouth as far as it could go, yawned, grunting audibly as though in pain; then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, said, "Excuse me," and drank his coffee.

We did not speak for several minutes. He offered me a

cigarette and ordered a cigar for himself. I had the impression that he was preparing to bite into a sour apple. And when he again began to discuss my proposal I noticed with surprise that of all that he had on his mind the thing that interested him least was the idea for which the Institute was offering me so much money. He spoke about it grudgingly, again yawning and grunting, and all the while that irrepressible ironic sneer danced about on his furrowed face.

"Look here, Doctor, I'm a soldier, and soldiers don't pay much attention to psychology. I only know that you have thought up a method of using radio broadcasting to bring about a sort of mass insanity behind the Iron Curtain. Or maybe it's better to say that by issuing certain statements you can create a general panic. Even though I don't understand the details, it is clear to me that you can use *fear* as the basic emotion felt by people in general today, and by those behind the Iron Curtain in particular. Of course, the part that appeals to us soldiers most is what I might call the aspect of blackmail: to get hold of compromising material on any one of the Bolshevik leaders and simply frighten him with it. To terrify people with contrived interpretations of each new law and each development in the party line. To generate horrors by the dozens. And at the same time to pretend to have underground liaison with anyone and everyone, with the single exception of Stalin. To multiply distrust, extend the purges, and leave each individual afraid of his own shadow. Is that approximately it?"

Blushing to the roots of my hair, I whispered, "Only approximately!"

I was terribly ashamed, and I was glad that no one else was listening to our conversation. This man removed all embellishments from my idea, stripped it naked, and left

only its cynical core. And without fitting it with new embellishments I could not contradict his interpretation. However the Colonel did not exploit my embarrassment, but quickly tried to relieve it.

"I appear to you to be a barbarian, don't I? Like the sort of person who would characterise Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*—which by the way is a first-rate thriller—as 'The story of a fellow who kills an old woman and is then very sorry about it.' But, look, let's go somewhere else. What would you think of a good cocktail before lunch? Or do you think it's too early for that?"

I had been concerned only with what this person would eventually ask of me, and not with the problem of who and what he was, but even without being profoundly interested in his person I could not fail to see that I was in the hands of an accomplished actor and an extraordinary liar, who would ultimately tell the truth. And one who wanted to tell the truth. If not in words, at least in gestures and in facial expressions; if not directly, then indirectly. He was surely acquainted in detail with my entire proposal, a proposal which he called remarkable and original in order then to tell me what he really thought of it. He purposely spoke of *Crime and Punishment* as a thriller so that I would see without delay that I was dealing with a quick, clever, well-read man. Why then these evasions, this irony? Of course, in the last analysis, it's just—business. All right, but why be so furtive about it?

In the street the Colonel linked his arm in mine. I do not know why I found this pleasant. Perhaps it was because ever since my youth I had had to make all my own decisions, until now, when I was being led by the hand by a capable man who had sufficient strength and power to solve everything for me.

As he led me along like this, the Colonel's voice was jovial and in no way disturbing.

"Doctor, I know it's too damned early for alcohol. But there are two reasons why we can't avoid it: first, bars are the least crowded places at this time of day, and we can't afford to be interrupted, and second, you have to get a little tight. Relax, I'm not going to pick your brains; I just want us to be able to talk a little more freely. When a man has a little under his belt he thinks less, he asks fewer questions, and he's more ready to accept things."

"We don't have to drink for the second reason; I am used to not asking questions. A moment ago I was about to ask you to say everything you have to, without worrying about how it sounds. I'm not the least bit sensitive, and I regard the whole affair as a business matter. I do not consider myself an outstanding psychiatrist—I've had too little success in America for that—nor do I consider myself an inventor or anything at all out of the ordinary. So I haven't the slightest doubt that you were led to me by a series of coincidences and not by my outstanding qualities. I accept your proposition with open arms, of course. I have recently felt exhausted, beaten, and numb; I have to go away somewhere and take a rest and solve a number of basic personal problems. And up to now I haven't had the money to——"

He interrupted me. It was not his nature to speak suddenly, or to stop in the middle of the sidewalk, as he did now. But his forehead wrinkled with concern, and his voice grew faint with alarm. "You can't go away now, friend, you can't even think about it! But let's save our words till we get some refreshment inside us. What do you think of this bar? I like the name—The Ice-box."

The bar was too well cooled, and my arms were

immediately covered with goose pimples. I had expected that we would sit at a corner table, but after looking about briefly and with only a moment's thought, the Colonel led me to the bar, where we sat on high revolving stools. There was one other guest at the bar, several seats away: a shabby old man with two days' growth of beard. His gestures were timid and his eyes were full of suspicion. The Colonel pulled out his neck, pointed with his chin at the old drinker, and spoke authoritatively.

"A hardened seeker after drunken justice. Look at him watching the bar-tender."

Turning his head to follow the bar-tender moving back and forth behind the counter, the old man resembled a spectator at a tennis match. He was not allowed to remain still a moment, because the young, dark-haired bartender dashed about mercurially, dusting bottles, rinsing glasses, and wiping the clean counter. He received our order from a distance, for at that very moment he felt it unwise to postpone collecting the ash-trays at the far end of the counter and piling them one on another. No sooner had the Colonel ordered two Scotch-and-sodas than he dropped the ash-trays, hopped over to us to show us his white teeth in a friendly smile, and immediately ran off to get shot glasses, then in the opposite direction for a bottle of soda water, elsewhere for glasses, and finally found the Scotch in a completely different place. For some incomprehensible reason the young man insisted on making his own work difficult, as he moved about followed by the sad eyes of the listless drinker. Silently, using only gestures, I asked the Colonel to explain.

He leaned over to me and whispered, "One custom in cheap American bars creates a wretched interdependence between the drinkers and those who supply the drinks. In order to keep a good customer, the bar-tender will give

him a fourth drink free after he has finished and paid for the first three. When he does so he must say, 'This one's on the house. Here's to you!'—probably one of the rules to discourage unfair competition. Shy customers will drink till they pass out, and spend their last cent if the bartender forgets his public-relations duties. They sit in one place, drink, pay, and wait and wait for that free shot of whisky. Determined, self-confident customers, of course, demand their rights in one way or another. Bartenders often take great pleasure in torturing their customers for their shyness. The more these poor fellows drink, the more desperately their eyes beg for one last, free drink, the less attention their tormentors pay them and the more generous they are towards the less bashful patrons. Here you have such a case. Shyness doesn't pay!"

"This bartender is a real sadist. You'd never expect it in such a nice-looking young fellow!"

"But, Doctor," the Colonel rebuked me, putting his arm round my shoulder protectively, "a psychiatrist shouldn't talk so naïvely! In the first place, it's not depraved to turn people's own weaknesses against them; it's normal and natural behaviour. And in the second place, when did you begin to judge human qualities on the basis of age and external appearance? You're inconsistent! Your proposal, which interested us so much, even if its scientific basis escapes a layman like me, was fundamentally a parallel of the game which our bartender here is playing with that poor fellow's weaknesses. He is turning the fellow's material wretchedness against him, as you plan to turn against the Communists the fear which has become part of their souls."

I did not look into the Colonel's face, because I was certain that I would find in it an expression that would increase my sudden feeling of irritation. I had had enough

of his neat, sarcastic observations, and I answered him somewhat sharply.

"I am astonished, Colonel, to see an experienced soldier lose sight of the strategic purpose of a plan so quickly. Doesn't it seem to you that the strategy of that fellow behind the counter and the plan which I submitted to the Institute differ slightly in their aims?"

He softened, slightly alarmed, and his words were soothing and his tone placating. "Of course, the intention is always the important thing. I have no desire to moralise — what sort of a soldier would I be if I did? We'll get to that, though, Doctor, because it is important to decide what your intention was when you sent us your proposal. In the future, however, I must ask you to forget all about the *general purpose* of what you are going to do for us. You leave that part up to us, and worry about your own personal goals. I was pleased when you told me that you want to consider the entire affair a business matter. If that's the way you feel, we can easily reach an agreement. Now drink up and then we will proceed to the least interesting portion of our discussion. We're going to review your own story. I have here your life history, which our intelligence section prepared for me. There may be mistakes in it, so we'd better go over it together. I hope this stupid formality does not bother you; you understand that your idea and everything connected with it come under the secret services, and obviously the powers that be have to know all about their collaborators. Here's to you, Doctor! Hmm, not bad; I like Scotch anyway. It leaves you with a clear head and no hangover."

The Colonel drank two-thirds of his glass in one gulp, wiped his mouth in his favourite gesture, and drew some crumpled sheets of paper out of his pocket.

Fascinated, I watched him spread his papers out, put

on his glasses, and compose his smiling face into a scowl. Colonel Howard obviously hated formalities. But I was interested to see what I would learn about myself. Rarely does one grow bored listening to others talk about oneself—and even less so when an officer of the espionage service is doing the talking.

“Ah, yes, here’s where it begins. You were born in Prague on March 20th, 1901. You went through secondary school and then you completed your medical studies at Charles University in Prague in an unusually short time. After receiving your doctorate you worked for several months in France, then you went to Vienna, where you attended lectures by Sigmund Freud, and finally you went to London to study. You spent a total of three years abroad. In September 1932 you were married, but a year later you applied for a divorce and were separated, and in 1934 you were finally divorced. Your wife was from Germany, her maiden name was Elsa Hess, and you met in London—— What’s the matter? Something you don’t agree with?”

“No, everything’s correct, only——”

“In 1933 you applied for an American immigration visa and left for the United States in February 1938.”

The Colonel removed his glasses, took a sip of whisky, and wiped his mouth carefully with the back of his hand. His voice, which had sounded impersonal and official, became animated again.

‘Now let’s have a short break! Doctor, take a drink and tell me honestly something which is extremely important to me. Please just tell me the truth and leave out all sentiment. Why should a successful young doctor, in 1933, in the middle of a peaceful world, suddenly decide to leave his native land and seek his fortune in a foreign country half-way round the world?’

He looked at me so pathetically that I thought he would embrace me if I did not lie to him.

I closed my eyes so that I could concentrate on what I was saying. Suddenly, against my own will, the answer came, out of my soliloquies of years ago, in words which I had never before spoken aloud:

"Because I was afraid of war. As soon as Hitler came to power I felt that war was inevitable, and I wanted to avoid it."

"Doctor, you're a man after my own heart! That answer makes things a lot simpler. I believe you absolutely. Let me shake your hand. You're the kind of man I like."

I looked at him in amazement. For the first time his eyes showed not the least glimmer of sarcasm. And his voice even trembled slightly. The man was actually moved!

As a result of his emotion and my growing astonishment and curiosity, we did not notice immediately that our glasses were empty but, unlike me, the Colonel pulled himself together enough to take in this fact. With a stately movement of a long index finger he ordered another drink and looked back at his sheaf of papers.

"You didn't have an easy time of it when you first came over, but nevertheless you prepared to take the examinations to qualify you for practice here in America. You didn't do badly, either. Then you worked in various psychiatric clinics—I have a list of them here, but I won't bore you with it. In 1944 you became an American citizen and the same year you opened your own office on the East Side of New York, near the Czech quarter. Most of your clients were European emigrés who came to you because it was easier to talk to you than to an American doctor. You speak fluent Czech, German, French, Italian, and of

course English, and you can get along in Polish and Russian. Right?"

"Right."

"Your friends include primarily a number of doctors whom you met in your studies and while working in various clinics, some of your wealthier patients, and some of your neighbours. These people are uninterested in politics, as you are yourself. After the end of the war you began to look up your relatives in Prague, and you learned that your mother had survived the occupation, but that she had spent three years in a concentration camp. Why did the Nazis lock her up?"

"By mistake. My mother was certainly not dangerous to the Germans, but someone turned her in for listening to enemy broadcasts. It wasn't true, of course. She herself thinks it was her own brother who did it."

"Why? Was it an old hatred, revenge, or what?"

"That's hard to say. We who didn't live through the occupation can't understand it. My mother's brother was questioned several times by the Gestapo, and when people are engulfed by fear their instinct for self-preservation makes it easy for them to denounce others."

"Let's go on. You succeeded in getting your mother to America. But she's not happy here, is she?"

"Why, you know that, too! My mother is seventy-two. She lives in the past, she doesn't speak English and she isn't going to learn, and the Russians liberate her from concentration camp and, in her opinion, they behave decently toward her. She simply cannot understand that the Russians could endanger her in any way. She's extremely homesick and she doesn't see why she can't go back."

"Do you think that the Communists would persecute a harmless old woman?"

"Frankly, no. My mother is unhappy under my very eyes, and I have often thought that I would not try to prevent her going back, but——"

"But what?"

I was forced to smile. "Why must I, a foreigner, explain to you, a colonel in the American secret service, the current situation in this country?"

"Ah, yes, I understand! You are afraid that your mother's return to Communist Czechoslovakia would injure you here in the U.S.A. Hmm, that fear isn't altogether unfounded. But look here, Doctor, we can solve that problem! If you receive money from us, you can send your mother to the country, to a Czech community somewhere. A nice little house, a garden, television—she would be crazy if she didn't get to like it here."

"I agree with you. I think I can do it *now*."

"And now the last point, a very personal one. I shall try to discuss this delicate matter as carefully and as little as possible. It's about women. Don't be embarrassed! Overlooking women ~~■~~ our business would be like not dotting our i's."

Suddenly he spoke with such exaggerated gentleness that ~~■~~ it as though I were a schoolboy and my angelically ~~■~~ ent teacher had found dirty pictures under my chair. ~~■~~ embarrassment I ordered another drink with the same ~~■~~ and ~~■~~ gure I had seen the Colonel use.

~~■~~ You're slightly over fifty, Doctor, but you're still ~~■~~ ous. ~~■~~ would have disconcerted us to find that you ~~■~~ avoided ~~■~~ women. I think that the list I have here of ~~■~~ women you've been involved with since you came to ~~■~~ rica is complete, but I won't read it over to you ~~■~~ use all of these ladies are above reproach—at least ~~■~~ from our point of view. For the last three years you have concentrated all your attention on only one woman. Her

name is Helen Thomas, she is thirty years old, she works in a large book-store on Fifth Avenue, and you see her every evening at six in her apartment. You met at a piano concert where you happened to have seats next to each other and where Rubinstein was playing. Now, the last question! Why don't you marry this alluring young lady? What's going on between you that's so serious that you are driven to melancholy, you close your office, and wander aimlessly around New York like a somnambulist?"

I gave a nervous little laugh; it sounded so affected that I was astonished myself.

"Now I really don't understand you! Of what possible importance could my relationship with Helen be to you?"

"Oh, my God! We want you to do something for us, so you have to be certain yourself of what you're doing. At least for a while you must remain the same person you have been until now. We can't take any chances of your suddenly starting to behave oddly for stupid, sentimental reasons. We also have to be sure that you aren't going to start telling your girl friend in some weak moment all about what you're doing for us. Miss Thomas probably knows about the plan you've submitted to us. But she must not know that we have adopted your suggestions."

"Helen doesn't know anything about it, nobody does. Things were going badly with me when I started to do a little extra by doing studies for the Institute, and that was when I worked out this proposal. Neither in my studies for the Institute nor when I was working out that plan did I see anything out of the ordinary in it, or anything to brag about. I have not quite \$3,000 in the bank, which I have to support my mother as well as myself. I wanted to go away somewhere for a long vacation so I could think over what to do next. My bad financial condition and the difference in age between myself and Helen

are the only reasons I hesitate to marry her. Does that satisfy you? Now I have a question. Please answer it as frankly as I've answered yours. What do you really take me for? What do you mean when you say I must remain the same person that I have been up till now in order to do the job you want to give me?"

"That's the sixty-four-dollar question, Doctor, but I'll try for it. Where shall I begin? In my opinion one thing is lacking from your proposal. I have supplied that missing item, which I shall tell you about briefly. Sure, we can create collective psychoses behind the Iron Curtain, and we are doing it, but the Communists are doing the same thing to us. Both sides are using fear, the reflected image of modern man. We terrify them by demonstrating to them their way of life, and they frighten us by picturing for us our own life. We turn their vigilance and insecurity into invisible cobwebs to strangle people, and they call our freedom and liberalism and tolerance corruption, and they look for it day and night in the very foundations of our entire system. We turn against them their own terror, their concentration camps, their purges, executions, deportations. They in turn exploit our 'anarchy' as the result of war, inflation, impoverishment, and general violence. On the other side even the most disciplined members of the Communist Party whisper to each other that they listen to our broadcasts, 'There is some truth in that,' while the ordinary people in the West, under the influence of direct and indirect Communist propaganda, have their doubts and think to themselves, 'We really are going to hell.'

The whole cold war is nothing but fear at what the other camp is supposed to be or to want. And in this struggle each person who is not satisfied with accepting official half-truths, but who must look for the whole,

unofficial truth, is giving aid to the enemy, whether he means to or not. We are at a disadvantage in that we can't legally forbid our citizens to seek the truth, and thus, although most of us know how to behave ourselves, we run the risk that those who are seeking the truth will stumble upon numerous bits of enemy propaganda. The East forbids its subjects to look for objective truth and makes the effort to find such truth look ridiculous and ugly. And now tell me, in such a situation, what kind of man is the most capable soldier of the cold war on both sides of the barricades? A fanatic, an idealist, a romantic, a dreamer? Nothing of the sort! Only bunglers like Hitler believe in the invincibility of an army of fanatics, and only the democrats who have been asleep for fifty years proclaim that truth will ultimately prevail by itself and in spite of itself. We are living today in the age of Stalin and the atom, and we must ask ourselves who comes out on top in such a period. The answer is, the man without interest in eternal truth. The man who recognises the truth of a single instant. Neither a fanatic nor a romantic dreamer. The sober man, the man without pathos. The man who can live quite happily without believing strongly in anything or anybody. The man of the age of Stalin and the atom, when he is in power, infects only youth with fanaticism, romanticism, and ideological passions. But he himself follows his clear-cut goals without emotion. He does not take it upon himself to ask where and why he is going, nor does he have metaphysical impulses; he is happy, or at least content, because he is going somewhere, because he is in motion, because he is alive, and this motion, or you can call it work, gives him life, as ticking gives life to a clock. The supreme interest of this man is that social life be as highly organised as possible. He is interested in the organisation of life and

to his whiskers from his wide-open eyes. Then he staggered out of the bar. I saw an ugly look on the face of the young man behind the bar. He seemed very badly frightened. His mouth was hanging open, his hand was opened wide and held up to protect his neck, and he looked at us with bulging, terrified eyes, as though he had strangled himself. He poured us no more Scotch. We both got up suddenly.

"Rebellion is rare in alcoholics. I was quite surprised," the Colonel noted thoughtfully.

And I answered in confusion, less to him than to myself: "Perhaps it doesn't pay not to worry about what others think of us."

CHAPTER TWO

HE took me to lunch at a restaurant which only the initiated would ever be able to find. One entered by climbing creaking wooden stairs in an old, ugly house with poorly-ventilated rooms and dusty offices. The dining-room on the second floor gave the impression of a private club of ill repute. The tablecloths were covered with spots, water was falling from the walls, the informally dressed waiters all wore braces, and most of the men eating there did not think it unnecessary to take off their hats. There were few women, but through an open door into the next room I could see about fifteen card-players crowded at a long table, with an equal number of onlookers standing about. Both players and spectators were extraordinarily quiet, and it occurred to me that these were indeed strange people who had time for cards in the middle of the day. I also feared that we might well leave this filthy hole with upset stomachs. My surprise was all the greater, therefore, when

on the tattered menu I found dishes that one doesn't see every day in America. Pike, stuffed squab, goose with dumplings, smoked sausage, and roast beef in sour cream were listed, while for sweet one could have all kinds of excellent Viennese cakes and pastry.

"You'll be even more surprised," said the Colonel, noticing my amazement, "when you taste their cooking. And in your honour we shall drink real Pilsen beer. You're foolish to make judgments just from what you see on the surface."

He was right about the cooking. The food was marvellous. While eating I quickly forgot about the ugliness and filth around me, and I felt considerably better with the first swallow of Czech beer that I had tasted for many long years. All of a sudden I laughed out loud, because it seemed to me ludicrous that the beer should bring up such a wave of poignant memories and feelings. The Colonel did not ask why I was laughing. He was apparently glad that I was in a good mood, for he was about to introduce me to the core of the matter.

It was only later that I was able to see clearly how he operated. What he confided in me was so fantastic that for me to understand my mission properly, and to accept it, it was quite necessary for him to get me slightly drunk and to confuse me with Central European cooking and Czech beer. And if it really was Colonel Howard's intention that his words should make me laugh, in which he was successful, he was a much greater hypnotist than I was a typical man of the age of Stalin and the atom.

Concretely, without emotion, without showing off, and with the assuredness of a well-informed political expert, he reminded me of important events in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, and connected them in logical order. He told me that after studying my proposal the Institute

had proceeded without delay to set in motion a number of programmes which, although they had previously been in the planning stage, nevertheless lacked a point of departure. That was apparently what I had provided. He gave me to believe that the elimination of certain important officials in the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the arrest of the Secretary-General of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, the removal of the Rumanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the purges in the Bulgarian Communist Party, the purges in the Ukraine, and the frantic search for imaginary deviationists throughout the eastern bloc were in large part the fruit of new propaganda methods which, if I did not invent them entirely myself, I at least had helped to perfect. In particular the general panic in certain satellite countries that resulted from foreign radio broadcasts announcing impending monetary reforms should be credited to my imagination. I was also indirectly the author of the threatening letters sent to Communist leaders on their birthdays, as well as of the poems by anonymous people's poets which had recently flooded the press in satellite countries and in which the first word of each line when read consecutively made an anti-communist slogan. The broadcasts assigning fictitious missions to non-existent agents, and the quantities of undecipherable telegrams sent from abroad to the leading officials of Communist régimes, were also results of my suggestion. In a word, the conductors of this entire new symphony of confusion and fear had received a new score from my hands.

The Colonel pointed out that in my proposal I had assumed that the Institute had access to confidential reports from the other side of the barricade, and that I had concentrated all my attention on working up this information to make librettos for our terrible operas and ballets—except

that to obtain confidential reports, particularly from highly placed persons, is a great deal harder than to process them and make use of them. It so happens that the Institute does not draw its information out of thin air. It includes among its collaborators people so daring, so adventurous, and of such broad talents that the true story of their exploits would be so fantastic as to eclipse all existing crime and espionage literature.

It seems that among the heroes of the most spirited and hazardous adventures is a countryman of mine. He appears to be everywhere. Moscow knows of his existence and the police force of every Communist régime is seeking his identity. It is the Institute's desire that this investigation be intensified to the utmost and that suspicion be directed at the largest possible number of people—at the Polish Ambassador in Washington, at a high official of the Czechoslovak Consulate in Moscow, at delegates to the United Nations, at western business-men travelling in the East, at scholarship students, at the relatives of all satellite Ministers, and at the Ministers themselves.

The truth about this person and his real name are known to only a very small group of highly trusted Americans. But even this handful of tested and reliable persons has been indiscreet. The Soviet secret service has found out more than the Institute wished it to know. Today the enemy espionage service knows quite certainly that this person, or at least an agent of his, is at present in America, and that something unusual is happening to him. It is believed that he is probably sick. The entire espionage and counter-espionage network of two continents has been alerted. The identity of this man is as important to Moscow as the results of the latest atomic experiments in America—for our man has inflicted more damage on the Soviet bloc in the cold war than would a half-dozen

atomic bombs in a hot war. Never in modern history has a single Power spent so much money, effort, and risk to investigate an agent, or has another Power exerted so much covert energy to maintain his disguise. The difficulty is that this person cannot be temporarily locked up and guarded, since he must continue his deception. As soon as one of the suspects drops out of sight for only an instant, Moscow will know for certain who the hunted man is. And on the other hand, in the spirit of my proposal, it is to the Institute's advantage that the number of suspects should grow to enormous figures. From the very fact that the enemy is so frantic in his efforts it can be concluded that he does not yet know the nationality of the man he is seeking.

And now, what has actually happened to our hero? On the very eve of his greatest mission he has become ill. Nothing fatal, but all the more treacherous for that very reason. He is mentally ill, suffering from persistent insomnia and accumulated anxieties. The Institute could have suffered nothing worse. Neither cancer nor tuberculosis would have endangered this agent's great mission as seriously as this psychic ailment. Colonel Howard had spent the past two nights in conference with his colleagues, discussing this problem. The patient cannot go to an American hospital. Moscow would get wind of it, and in addition the effort to maintain his cover would require measures which themselves would make him conspicuous. He cannot visit a doctor who is not in the American secret service, since the doctor would learn things which must not be known outside a limited circle. And then there is another great difficulty. Our man knows English, of course, but not well enough to talk to a psychiatrist. Well, it seems it was Colonel Howard to whom it occurred that the ideal doctor for this man would be me. Not only as

the father of the idea in whose service the agent became ill, but also as his countryman and, finally, as a disinterested specialist who would undoubtedly be perfectly discreet, since his attitude towards the whole affair would be only that of a professional attendant.

It is important that this man give me no unnecessary information, and that I ask him only those questions which are absolutely necessary for his treatment. If he tells me something politically important, I am to forget it immediately. Colonel Howard thinks it would be ideal if the patient could be put back on his feet with some sort of pills or injections.

Of course, this is only one side of the problem, the medical side. There remains the military aspect. Since the enemy already has some concrete information, he is to learn still more: that as a doctor I am in contact with the hunted man. Or, rather, that I am in a position to lead him to the man. The enemy will send his people to me as patients. However, the American counter-espionage service will also send agents to my office, since there they will have an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with their colleagues who are working for the other side. The patient himself, of course, will not come to my office, but will visit me in my apartment, to which he will receive a key. He will come only at night, between eleven and twelve. He will open the door himself, which will be less conspicuous than ringing the bell. Since my apartment will certainly also be watched, and Colonel Howard hates any sort of romantic stage props in such matters, my evening patient will not wear a mask, but will use dark glasses. Nonetheless, it is vitally important, as I myself can understand, that I under no circumstances look my client directly in the face.

There remains very little for me to do. I am to reopen

my old office or, if this is impossible, I am to find another in the same neighbourhood and put a notice in the American and Czech newspapers in New York, announcing that Dr. Arnost Malik is again receiving patients, giving my office hours. I am to give the Colonel the key to my apartment now; I am to find it within three hours in my mail-box, and in the meantime my new patient will have received a duplicate. Before saying good-bye, the Colonel is to give me an advance of \$2,000 in fifty-dollar notes, and I am to receive the remaining \$18,000, also in cash, when the treatments are finished. I am not to report the \$20,000 for income-tax purposes; the Institute will make arrangements with the Treasury Department, and I will suffer no inconvenience for failing to report this income.

I am to charge the odd clients who are about to descend on me the same rates that I have been used to charging my other patients. I may be sure that none of them will try to pay me by cheque, and that I will always receive cash from them. It is left up to me how I am to explain to my closest friends why I have decided to reopen my practice. In no case must a living soul know a word of my real purpose. Furthermore, until I finish the treatments I am not to visit the Institute and I am not to telephone Colonel Howard, or even to write to him. Only if something extremely important comes up am I to call a secret number, which he will give me, and speak the password 'Alfons'. The Colonel will then immediately call me back. Alfons is the code name of my midnight patient.

"And now, Doctor, is there anything which isn't clear to you?" asked the Colonel, and delicately blew cigar smoke in my eyes. "You laugh! That's a good sign! You're amused by your new job instead of being frightened. That's the way I like it!"

I laughed convulsively. I hadn't heard anything so funny for a long time.

"Who wouldn't laugh, when you think what my waiting-room is going to look like! I beg you, Colonel, do you actually believe that an ordinary doctor can handle so many healthy patients, each of whom will probably have a pistol in his pocket? And what if they all start fighting among themselves and kill each other and the police come? Look here, do you really mean all this? And one more thing. Forgive me for being so frivolous in talking about the most serious problem of your secret service, but how am I to tell my counterfeit patients apart; how am I to know who is threatening me, who is to protect me, and whose mind really is disturbed?"

"And why must you distinguish among them? We have selected you for this job for a number of reasons, as I have already told you, but the main one is that we consider you the sort of person who will not try to discern anything. Cure Alfons of his insomnia, return his self-confidence to him, pocket your money, and go on as though nothing had happened. It's a good thing that you see only the comic side of the entire affair, but it is my duty to warn you of its serious side: I do not think that you will be in any danger, but there is a possibility of it. Our people will pour in on you not to protect you, but to look for enemy agents. No fights are going to break out in your office, don't worry; but if you are incautious, that is to say if you are overly curious or indiscreet or if Alfons arouses in you interests for which you are not being paid, before we can do anything about it, Soviet agents may take you and pull your brains apart by their own methods. They will send their most capable people to your office, drawn by the bait which we are now preparing for them. They must think that you know

absolutely nothing, that you have no idea who Alfons is, how important he is, or that he is one of your patients, among whom they themselves will try to find him. If they have the slightest idea, my friend, that you know anything, I cannot guarantee your safety. We have also taken that into consideration; for their part, the other side would use you without telling you what was happening."

I stopped smiling. Not from fear, but because I suddenly became interested in a certain small detail.

"You apparently think that for the same price I am capable of doing a similar job for the other side, don't you, Colonel?"

"No, I don't think so. You wouldn't do that!"

"You say that very convincingly, but I am not entirely sure that you really believe it."

"All right, Doctor, since you insist on frankness, I'll give it to you straight. I'll tell you directly what I've previously only hinted at. You wouldn't perform the same service for the other side because you are not a person who enjoys taking risks. If you happened to live behind the Iron Curtain you might have been willing to prepare for the Communist Ministry of Information just such a proposal as you worked out for us. You are a supremely non-political person, and for precisely that reason you are politically useful. If you were a passionate anti-Communist, or an ardent exponent of democratic ideals, I wouldn't come within miles of you. But you just want to live. Like me, like millions of decent people. You know things, you have certain skills, and you want to make your way in the world. What difference does it make to you that you have visitors from both sides in your waiting-room? About as much difference as it would to find the janitor fighting with his wife in front of your house. You can't wait around for ever in the hallway till the fight is over;

you have to go out, you have things to do, people are waiting for you, and the fight concerns you only because it holds you up in the hallway. If you interfere in the fight you do so not in the interest of justice for either the janitor or his wife, but in the interest of getting out of the house—and also, of course, so that you won't get beaten up yourself. And I don't want you to develop any other interest throughout this entire affair; in fact I insist on it. I myself am only doing a job, while I leave high policy to my chief, who himself takes orders from his superiors, and they in turn from the President and his advisers; and it is for the President and his advisers alone to assign responsibility and to determine who is to search his conscience. We have to be like bees, Doctor; we gather nectar, but it's none of our business who eats the honey."

It was impressive to see the effort with which he tried to convince me that I had no character and that it was a virtue not to have character. And I was surprised to notice how little disagreement I felt with what he said, and how throughout I was interested only in the *what*, and not in the *why*. This *what* also included the danger against which he warned me, but I was not frightened. I was pleased, even a little proud, that I was not afraid, and that I continued to look on the Colonel's plan as a joke.

"And when does this comedy begin?" I asked in a blasé manner, and the Colonel frowned. He put his hand reprovingly on my shoulder and scolded in a fatherly tone.

"Don't be too eager, Doctor, and don't call it a comedy. In our business humour is important, to be sure, but only as a spice. . . . Alfons may show up in your apartment tonight, or maybe not till tomorrow, or even a whole week from now. That depends on a large number of things. In any event, beginning tonight you must always be home

between eleven and twelve. I hope no one else visits you that late in the evening."

"No one ever visits me, either early or late. You are the first person in several months who has looked for me at my apartment."

"Excellent! Don't forget to leave the light on in your front hall so Alfons won't break his leg when he comes in. We have noticed that the lights in the halls are kept on all night, so there won't be any trouble there.—Oh yes, when do you think you can get your office opened up again?"

"Very soon. I'll go and see to it as soon as I leave you. And I'll put a notice in the papers today. . . . I imagine that nobody but your people will show up in my office, and perhaps one or two of my former patients. I can't imagine that the Soviet espionage system would have available right in the heart of New York enough capable actors for such a peculiar job. It's no small matter to simulate mental disorder well enough to convince a doctor. But that's none of my business."

"Quite right, that really isn't your worry. One more question, Doctor, which is really of only personal interest to me: Do you honestly and frankly believe in the methods and results of modern psychiatry? I mean, do you have at least a bit of the respect for your trade that a surgeon has when he has to take out an appendix or a kidney stone?"

"Hmm, that's a very common question from people who don't think they need psychiatry or ever will need it. Nor is the comparison a good one. It would be much more to the point if you asked me whether I have at least as much faith in healing minds as the average pastor has in the mercy of God."

"I can see that you don't like to answer questions

directly, so I conclude that you have no great opinion of your own capabilities. That makes me uneasy when I think of poor Alfons."

"Just a moment, Colonel, let's get together on this. I have little faith in the psychiatric methods which patients demand nowadays as a result of literature, movies, superstition, and fads. And I also lack sympathy with the majority of fashionable patients whom psycho-analysis helps chiefly to relieve the boredom of their lives, who really endure no great suffering, but who continually want new excitement, more refined than they can get from nicotine, alcohol, and television. In other words I am not too fond of the type of therapy which pampered, bored, blasé patients like so well. But Alfons is certainly not this kind of patient, so perhaps you will allow me to tell you this time that it is none of your business."

His eyes bulged a little and he drew his long neck still farther out of his collar, surprised at my boldness. And then he said, as though it were the most natural thing, "Quite right. Now come with me to the men's room!"

"To the—where?"

"The men's room. You don't think I'm going to pay you two thousand dollars right here, and give you my secret telephone number and get your key from you in public, do you?"

For the first time his voice lost its pleasantness and impatience crept into his tone—probably because I did not completely fit the image which he had formed of me. "Bill," he cried, as though he had already called the waiter twice in vain. In the hot, unventilated men's room, where one breathed only enough to avoid suffocating, he gave me two bundles of banknotes, which I hurriedly shoved in my hip pocket without stopping to count them. Then he gave me a slip of paper with his secret telephone

number and I gave him my key. The whole transaction lasted only a fraction of a minute. He went to wash his hands, while I went out on to the stairs, took a deep breath, and waited.

"Now I'll leave you, Doctor. In the places we've been I feel at home with the drinks, the food, and the people, but on the street I'm uneasy. One never knows whom he may meet there. Well, take it easy, and buy some flowers for Helen. How long has it been since you bought her flowers? Excuse me, that's none of my business. Well, so long. When it's all over we'll celebrate. I'll go first, and you leave about five minutes after me."

I left about a minute later, because people were coming into the restaurant and I thought it unwise to stand around. I caught sight of him again. His walk resembled a stagger. He had pulled his neck down into his shoulders. I felt slightly dizzy in the damp heat of the street. All my thoughts spun so fast that I could catch up with none of them. I did catch and hold one, but I could make nothing of it. And then, without knowing exactly why, I went back up the stairs into the restaurant, found a phone booth, looked up the number of the Psychological Warfare Institute, and asked for Colonel Robert Howard's department.

"I would like to talk to Colonel Howard."

A friendly, official voice repeated at regular intervals, "One moment . . . just a moment, please." Finally another pleasant feminine voice announced, "I'm sorry, the Colonel has been out of the office all morning, and I don't know whether he will return today."

"Well, thank you. I'll call tomorrow."

I left the telephone booth and smiled as I thought how surprised the Colonel would be if he could have seen and heard me verifying his identity. But why did I check on

him? What suspicions were in that thought which I could not understand? Of course he was the person he said he was—after all, he was familiar with all the details of my proposal, and he knew all about my personal life. Undoubtedly I telephoned the Institute only to be doing something which would not conform to the picture of my character in the mind of the tall Colonel with the giraffe-like neck.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN I set about reopening my office my head whirled with thoughts and memories in which I took a sort of painful delight. It was as though I were reciting old stories to myself. For instance, I remembered my third great love affair, when I was twenty years old. I thought she was beautiful, but others saw in her the unpleasant, unsatisfied wife of an old man who owned a large jelly factory. I lost her favour because I was clumsy and talked too much. One summer evening we sat quietly in an outdoor restaurant in Prague, smoking and drinking grenadine. From time to time I shyly stroked her upper arm, which was uncovered, while she waited for my unsteady hand to venture a more intimate caress. She leaned her shoulder against mine and opened her blouse so that even in the twilight the furrow between her breasts was clearly and purposely visible. Her décolletée aroused my desire, but not my courage. I bragged, "If I had a thousand crowns, I know where I'd take you and what I'd do!" She opened her purse and took out a thousand-crown note, something which I had seen only once or twice before in my whole life. Then she said coldly, "Here's a thousand crowns, now what shall we do?" A flood of bold thoughts

raced through my mind, but because they were in such profusion and because my embarrassment was so great, I could only stammer, "For God's sake, I don't know!" Whereupon my beloved arose and picked up the thousand-crown note. "You *are* a fool," she sneered, and went away.

All this continued to go through my mind on my way to Helen's apartment, because the memory had embarrassed me for so many years. But what were a thousand crowns compared with twenty thousand dollars? What did my childish confusion amount to beside my present predicament? At first it had seemed to me that twenty thousand dollars could solve all my problems, every last one. Now I was not so sure. I chided myself derisively, and told myself that I would spoil everything now, as I had done then.

Even the beginning was grotesque. Awkwardly I carried a bunch of red roses, which I had bought less out of chivalry than in defiance of Colonel Howard. God only knows why I found it necessary to do something for which the man with the giraffe-like neck would scoff at me. It would never have occurred to him that I would actually listen to his final biting advice and take Helen a bouquet.

When she opened the door for me, Helen had on a carelessly fastened negligée, and her eyes and voice were full of peevishness, which did not depart readily.

"Arnost, I declare you get later every day!"

"I'm sorry, Helen. I just stopped to buy you these flowers, and that made me late."

"Oh, they're lovely! Whatever got into you? Thank you very much, but for goodness' sake don't stand there like a statue!"

Although I did not expect to make an enormous impression with my gift, I was nevertheless put out by

Helen's indifference and quickly lost all ability to see any humour in the situation. Few people were able to disappoint me as frequently as she; I was almost invariably wrong when I tried to anticipate her behaviour and her next mood. When she had one of her melancholy or stubborn moments, I really suffered, and would try anything, however rash or ill-advised, to dispel it.

As usual we kissed and as usual in our hearts both knew how much had vanished recently from our kisses. But it was not entirely my fault. Helen always aroused me, but the more I craved her, and the more I sought to find some basis of understanding, the more she eluded me by her words and behaviour. At the same time she ~~were~~ looked none of the external stimuli which aroused attracted me to her, so that I often ~~was~~ was purposely torturing me.

Really I had no plan of how I would ~~tell~~ ~~her~~ with out telling her what had happened. ~~Her~~ good before me, reading signs of great ~~nothing~~ ~~to~~ startled me.

"Has something happened. Almost ~~most~~"

The lack of interest in ~~the~~ question offended me. That day, which had been so full of events, had made me more sensitive than usual, and I had felt that I would like to do something startling which would turn her indifference into full, enthusiastic interest.

"First of all, let's sit down, Helen."

"You mean so I won't drop from excitement?"

Sarcasm, which Helen was never able to use properly, and which was often vulgar, annoyed me particularly at this time. I wanted to see her different—happy, not bitter—and I wanted to see it as soon as possible, quickly, now. So I threw down my trump card, without thinking, although I had not even considered doing so before.

"I think we'll get married in the autumn."

She looked up. That was all. What I had said interested her only the slightest bit more than had my flowers. She blushed a little, trembled slightly, and then came up to me; she rubbed her face gently against mine and kissed me quickly on the mouth. Then she twisted herself out of my arms, stepped back a few feet, and hastily closed her *négligée*.

"What made you decide so suddenly?" she asked pleasantly, but without excitement.

I looked around carefully, as though I might find the answer written somewhere on the wall. As usual the room was in a delightful feminine disorder, with underwear lying about, the door not quite closed, newspapers on the table, and a faint odour of perfume. Darkness was gathering in the corners of the room and

I sighed, "but I always feel like that. I shall have to get married; we can't go on like this."

"No, we can't," she said.

"But, Helen, you're not the least bit happy about it, are you?"

"I'm happy, Arnost, but what do you want me to do, dance or something? Maybe I've just waited a little too long."

Her coolness was unbearable. I was afraid I might explode, or that I would make another bold play. Helen began to take off her kimono. I do not know whether it was because she was too warm or because she intended to put on street clothes. I was familiar with the performance. She had often taken off her clothes in my presence, with evident pleasure and no shame, just after placing me

beyond arm's reach by her attitude. I stood up, my whole body shaking. She saw this out of the corner of her eye, and seemed to ponder the same question as I: Did we still like each other at all, or did we hate each other? I conquered the impulse to turn to her, kiss her and tear off the remaining pieces of lingerie; I stared at the floor and felt rather than saw that she was sitting almost completely disrobed on the edge of a chair looking at me as at some inanimate object.

I went over to the table and began to spread out the money I had received from the Colonel. Behind my back I heard her bare feet on the floor. Then for the first time her voice was warm with curiosity and participation.

"For goodness' sake, who gave *us* all that money?"

At once she made me hers—as she had so many times before—and I forgave her everything for this natural, naïve word 'us'.

I turned on my heel and grasped her in my arms. She pressed herself against me closely, baring her bosom and closing her eyes. But it lasted only a few seconds. Then she freed herself quickly, drew herself away from me, and asked impatiently, "How many surprises do you have for me today, silly boy?"

When she was in a good mood she always called me her silly boy, and when I objected, asking when I had ever been silly, she would pout and say that I weighed every word on an apothecary's scales, whereas she used words more for their sound than for their real meaning.

"Just two. The first one you already know and I'll tell you the second right now. I had a new patient this morning. He was very anxious for me to treat him in my apartment, rather than my office. He is afraid he might meet someone he knows in my waiting-room, and it is very important to him that no one should know he needs a

psychiatrist. I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about this suggestion, so he began to beg me and finally, in order to persuade me, he gave me two thousand dollars as an advance, although I didn't ask him for any money. This unexpected visit has put me back on my feet, and I have decided to open my office again. I think I'll have a better chance of finding myself again by working than by taking it easy in the country. And I can see now that I'll need money first if I'm ever to get out of this blind alley."

I was quite satisfied with this improvisation, in spite of the fact that in such a condensed form it seemed a little improbable to Helen. But in any event it cheered her up again.

"That sounds like a fairy tale! Sure you haven't added a little, or kept a few details to yourself? That man really must be crazy. What's the matter with him, anyway?"

Her last question confused me, and I did not answer her for a few moments.

"You've never asked me about my patients, and I've never told you anything about them."

"You never tell me anything about yourself or about your work. But maybe you'll change after we're married."

There could have been sarcasm in her voice. I was not sure. I answered in the same tone, "A lot of things ought to change after we're married."

We stood facing one another, smiling stiffly, as though we both had something on our minds which we did not wish to utter. We waited. Her right breast was completely uncovered. With all my heart I wished that she would attract me with something besides her body, so I stammered, "Why are you getting undressed?"

"Oh, I'm just absent-minded. But since I am undressed, I'd better dress quickly so we can celebrate our engagement. We could go to a theatre or to a concert."

"We're not going to celebrate our engagement by going to any theatre."

"Oh, go on, silly boy!—it would be embarrassing for me right now . . . just because you've decided to get married and have made some money. Let's go to the theatre! I'm sure we can still get tickets."

"It would be embarrassing for you," I mimicked. "Don't you ever think of what is embarrassing to me?" I asked, choking with anger and disappointment. "Mainly because you don't pay attention. I've just explained to you"—I had explained nothing to her—"that, beginning today, I won't be able to go out in the evening for a long time, because I have to wait for my patient."

"You mean he's going to come at night? Every night?"

"Yes, every night."

"Strange patient," she said thoughtfully, and looked searchingly into my eyes.

"Helen, you know that only strange people under strange circumstances are willing to pay so much money. Now it's time for me to go."

"Wait just a little while, Arnost," she said with unexpected gentleness. "I have some Rhine wine in the refrigerator, let's at least have a glass to celebrate."

"All right, Helen, although I've already had something to drink today."

"I know, I could tell," she said with the least suggestion of criticism, "but you can take one more glass. After all, this is our engagement."

At that moment both of her breasts were exposed. I stared at them fixedly and asked myself: Engagement or *finis*?

I drank three glasses in all, and felt my limbs turning to wood and my tongue growing thicker. With what I

had drunk before, the alcohol was beginning to dull my senses, so that in spite of all the unusual excitement of the past twelve hours, the end of that day was not very different from all the preceding days. I took leave of Helen as always—dryly and sadly. I no longer had any desire for her. Besides, she had been dressed while we drank together.

On the way home I again fell to thinking that I liked Helen much more from a distance than close at hand, and then it occurred to me that of all my various feelings for her the strongest was my concern that she should not be made unhappy through any fault of mine. I wanted to think about this discovery for a while, but had no strength left to do so.

I felt a small flash of elation when I found the key to my apartment in my mail-box, but I did not let my mind wander over all the unheard-of things that had happened to me that day. My mind was again vacant.

The heat in the apartment was the finishing touch. I used my last spark of energy to open all the windows wide and then, dripping with perspiration, exhausted, and irritated at myself, at people, and at the things around me, I tossed about on the bed, trying not to think, not to remember, not to stay awake or to go to sleep, but merely to wait and not to think what or whom I was waiting for.

I actually enjoyed my semi-consciousness, so that when a sudden thought from the depths of my torpid consciousness reminded me that I was supposed to leave a light burning somewhere because I promised someone I would do so, I merely turned my head to escape the reminder and abandoned myself again to my wakeful slumber.

A bell rang. Startled, I jumped up and ran both hands through my hair, trying to clear my brain. I did not want to return from my vacuum. Again the bell rang, un-

willing to give me time to come to life. Auto Why did
 went to the door, forgetting to turn on a light.

thought of which I was capable was that whether run
 ringing was a man and that he was not supposed to come

It was not a man, however; it was my mother. over-

We faced each other a moment, surprised, neither you
 ing into the other's face. Finally I pulled myself together.

"Has something happened, mother?"

"I don't know; why don't you turn on a light?"

I turned on the light in the foyer and my mother came
 in. She seemed to stand taller and straighter. She had on
 a black dress which she usually wore only to church; it
 must have been very warm on a hot July evening. She
 looked round while I drew up an armchair for her; she
 sat down, but only after she had picked up a packet of
 cigarettes from the floor and put them on a table.

"Your place is an awful mess, Arnost. Now if you'd
 only let me keep it clean for you, instead of that Irish girl,
 you'd like it a lot better. Do you realise this is only the
 third or fourth time I've ever been here?"

"I know. I'm surprised you even found your way here
 at night."

"Why do you keep looking at your watch?"

"I'm waiting for someone, mother. I'm sorry, but you
 can't stay more than half an hour. Has something hap-
 pened to you?"

"No, nothing happened. Are you expecting Helen? You
 can certainly let me see her."

"No. I'm not waiting for Helen. I just left her a little
 while ago."

"Arnost, you look terrible. I worry about you more and
 more."

"Oh, mother, please! There's nothing wrong with me.
 How often do I have to tell you? Sometimes I think

had drunk me to get sick so that you'd have someone to take
 senses, so ou're not happy otherwise. Now just tell me
 the past d quickly what's happened to you."
 different acted you for dinner this evening. You promised
 Helen come. I'm terribly worried about you; you forget
 desire promises so easily, recently. You used not to be
 drank hat. When we still lived in Klanovice, and you were
 your first or second year at the University——"

I bent over her and stroked her hair and face so that my
 hiding would not hurt her.

"Mother, forgive me, but that's not simple or quick.
 You know perfectly well I love to listen to you for hours
 on end when you tell me about how we used to live and
 when you don't complain about the present. But this time
 I really am in a tight spot. This man I'm waiting for is
 extremely important. Our whole future depends on him.
 Yours too. And he may be here in twenty minutes."

I thought the silence which followed would never end.
 My mother never took her grey, careworn eyes off me.
 She did not move; she merely folded her hands in her lap
 in a gesture of miserable patience. Her hands had done
 their life's work and were now fit only for praying. I
 looked at my watch again. And only then, quietly but
 firmly, as though she had just said to herself "God's will
 be done!" did she say, "Arnost, Elsa is in the city. She
 wants to see you."

No, it was not fright, it was neither fear nor anger
 which stunned me and left my entire body paralysed.
 Astonishment was not even the dominant feeling in my
 confusion. It was as though I had always expected that
 one day I would hear this, and was merely surprised to be
 hearing it just now. I had to say something, however, ask
 some question. Only all questions were equally important
 or equally foolish. How did my mother know this? How

did Elsa find her? What was she doing here? Why did she want to see me?

I sat like a wooden image and watched my mother run to the bathroom, wet the corner of a towel, and then come over and bathe my temples. Then she said carefully, overlooking my confusion, "You are perspiring so, and you won't take off your coat and tie and undo your shirt. Here, I'll help you, lift up your arm."

I let her take off my coat for me, and I heard her scold me, detached and passive as though I were still a small child.

"I don't want to see her!" I finally whispered.

"Hold still a minute. I want to wipe your chest with this damp towel, that will make you feel better. It feels cold, doesn't it? . . . Arnost, I didn't make any promises to her, but I had to tell you. She first rang me up about a week ago. Of course, I didn't recognise her voice immediately, and you can imagine how surprised I was to hear someone talking German to me. Would you believe it, after all these years I could still talk German? Well, we both cried a little—after all, you know how much she did for me when they arrested me, and then afterwards, too. She was the only one who sent me parcels, when she could. And then, when it was all over, I thought she was dead, and she thought I was, too. Now, don't move, I'll wet the towel again. . . . Guess how she found us! She made a list of all the Czech and Slovak periodicals in the country and wrote to all of them asking if they knew your address. That was how she also found out that I was alive and in America. Of course, she got in touch with me first. Does that feel cool? Now I'll dry you off. After the war she married an American officer. But as soon as he brought her over here and they settled down, suddenly he died. He wasn't even sick. He didn't

leave her badly off. He had money and a lot of insurance. They didn't have any children. No, Arnost, don't put that shirt on again, it's all wet. Just sit still like that awhile and then put on a clean one. Where do you put your dirty laundry? Oh, I see, here. Well, I don't want to talk you into anything, but after so many years, when everything's over, why shouldn't a reasonable person like you want to see his divorced wife? I don't even think Helen would mind."

Although I tried to talk out loud I continued to whisper, as though I had suddenly become hoarse.

"For God's sake, mother, you've done enough. Don't get Helen involved in anything; it's a good thing you two can't understand each other. For the first time I'm glad you don't know English. Just now I can't and don't want to see Elsa, I have other things to worry about. Maybe some other time. What makes you think it's all over now? I'm not complaining, and I'm not sorry. But that doesn't mean I'm completely thick-skinned."

"Arnost, don't be mean! Nobody thinks that of you."

"Mother, don't be angry, but I must ask you please to go. It's five to eleven and that man—I'm not scolding you, but it would have been a lot better if you had saved your big news till tomorrow."

"I'm going, Arnost. Only I'd like to tell you that I didn't come over on account of Elsa. That could wait. But I was terribly worried when you didn't come for dinner. I had some sort of evil premonition. You mustn't hold it against your old mother if she thinks her boy may be sick. I never was very pleased that you picked crazy people for your patients. After all, it——"

"Don't worry, mother, I won't go crazy. Perhaps it is the fact that I am actually too sane that makes you uneasy and makes you think I am sick. Now, good-night. I'll go

as far as the front door with you; I really don't dare go a step farther tonight."

"For goodness' sake, don't keep telling me that. You can see I'm already on my way; you don't even have to go downstairs with me if you don't want to! Oh, my, but you've changed so! I'm not inquisitive, but I'd like to see that fellow you're waiting for."

I was no longer hoarse, and I almost screamed. "Why?"

"Because I can't imagine what kind of a person this visitor of yours can be if you can't even say to him, 'I'd like you to meet my mother,' and then let me go."

I took her head soothingly in my hands and kissed her on the forehead. I spoke in a sentimental tone with which I was always successful whenever I wanted to placate her.

"He comes from a world full of scarecrows and witches, mother. You used to tell me about them in stories meant to frighten bad boys, only instead of being frightened your bad boy felt a desire to become better acquainted with these ghosts. Sleep well; I won't make you wait tomorrow, I'll come to dinner, really."

When I came back upstairs I left the light burning in the front hall, but I put out the lights in my own apartment. My numbness and fatigue had returned, draining both my memory and my imagination. I trembled a little. But in the darkness I became fully awake. With dazzling clarity I saw everything that had happened to me, and over and above this earthly drama, into which I was drawn by people made of flesh and blood, I sensed another play, tempting me to take a part. Not a play directed by an officer of the secret service, but a different one, whose action developed as it were in opposition to the first. Elsa! I repeated her name in my heart, I whispered it, and was surprised to find no bitterness on my tongue. It left me rather the taste of wind blowing from far, far away,

and a nostalgic desire to travel down those distances, to return to the places where the roads and paths were overgrown. I did not reminisce, I did not live over a single event of those distant years. Nevertheless, I suddenly found myself immersed in an atmosphere where people were more than mere shadows, things more than mere objects, and life more than the instinct for self-preservation. Was I experiencing the beginnings of faith? Was I really beginning to look forward to something, something more than an escape from a web of my own making? What was it? I thought of money, quantities of money, whole stacks of money neatly arranged. No, it was not money that excited me at the moment. I imagined Helen as my wife. At the table, in the kitchen, reading a book, on skis, in her dressing-gown, and nude. No, I had no desire for her now. It was a sound, a note, a kind of distant music, the sort one never remembers clearly and which one nevertheless hears distinctly in one's mind—it was this which captivated me and maddened me.

Absorbed in this nebulous music, which was blown away by shadows and phantoms and returned on the gusts of darkness and in my own breathing, I fell asleep and dreamed of the sea and the wind and the waves. When I awoke I tasted salt on my lips. It was morning. Alfons had not come.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALFONS did not come to my apartment the second or the third night, but the first patients appeared in my office. They came all at once, so to speak, the day after I had managed to fix it up to a point where it was not offensively dirty, dusty, and full of cobwebs and stale air,

although it remained far from the picture of a doctor's confessional.

It was my intention to examine each of my patients through the peep-hole in the door between my working office and the waiting-room, which was furnished with chairs and tables, ash-trays and old magazines. I had placed on the door to the waiting-room a sign reading:

RING AND ENTER

When the bell rang the first time both a man and a woman entered. For several moments, however, they stood with their backs to me, examining the reproductions of Czech landscapes which I had hung about the walls. They had apparently not come together, or at least they behaved as though they did not know one another. Very soon the bell rang and both patients sat down quickly facing me, as though they were afraid they would not find an empty seat, since there were only five chairs in the waiting-room. I had little chance to examine them, since I was now completely occupied with my new visitor, whom I recognised. He was not a former patient, nor did I know him well, but I would nevertheless have stopped and talked to him had I run into him in the street. His name was Jiri Kaminsky; a man about thirty-five who was thought to be a gifted Czech writer. He came to America sometime around 1947, and about a year later I met him at a party at the house of a former Czechoslovak consul who after resigning sold office supplies and lived more on the favour of his friends than on sales of pens, pencils, and paper. It was said of this consul that he was being supported by a young American woman, a hairdresser. Jiri Kaminsky made a good impression on me at the party. He did not complain, he did not brag, he did not slander other Czechoslovaks, he was enthusiastic about America;

in short he was different from the majority of exiles in America, who, although they strangely enough never found anything to say against him, still were unable to credit him with a single act in support of 'the struggle for the independence of the homeland.' As far as I was able to remember, Kaminsky had some sort of small income, to which he added from time to time by writing political articles and short stories for small periodicals. I had read none of his literary work myself, and everything that flashed through my mind as I looked at him through the glass peep-hole in the door I had heard either from him or from the unending gossip of our fellow countrymen, in the office, or in one of the stores or restaurants of the Czech quarter.

The appearance of a man whom I knew, although he had never been one of my patients, did not fit the mental picture I had formed of my bizarre mission. I was unable to believe that Kaminsky could be in need of medical attention from me. On the other hand I did not understand why Colonel Howard did not warn me if it was the intention of his colleagues to send to my office an agent whom I had previously met. And the third possibility, that Kaminsky could be working for the Soviets, dissatisfied me because I thought it improbable. I would never have imagined that such a distant enemy had at his disposal in the middle of New York such a large number of people that there was always someone available qualified to have access to any person who might become of interest.

As I thought this all through in my concealed position I remembered the Colonel's advice not to concern myself with the problem of who was who among my real and false patients, but merely to fulfil my simple assignment. So I shrugged my shoulders and devoted my attention to the other visitors. The man was a gaunt sixty-five and

the woman a buxom, coquettish forty. He was bald and had old-fashioned pince-nez attached to a black cord, while she had a large bosom and in her bleached hair wore three white flowers. He frowned and wrinkled his nose, as though he smelled something unpleasant, while she smiled a broad smile, turning her head from side to side, as though she were wishing a good morning from the bottom of her heart to numerous dear friends. She looked in the very direction from which I was examining her, her smile broadened, dimples appeared on her face, and she cocked her head pleasantly so that I started, thinking she saw me staring at her.

Then I opened the door and entered the waiting-room. All three stood up to greet me. I tried to behave as naturally and as spontaneously as possible. I went first to Kaminsky, held out my hand, and spoke to him in Czech. I did not allow him time to finish the slightly embarrassed sentence which began, "Actually, Doctor, I'm here quite by accident," but turned to the smiling blonde and introduced myself, and finally I welcomed the living caricature of a noble line that was plainly almost extinct. Thereupon I made a short speech to all of them in which I apologised for having no nurse, explaining that I had just reopened my office after a considerable interval, and that today I could see only one patient and the others must make appointments. Since I could see that my good friend Mr. Kaminsky was among my guests, I went on (exaggerations of this sort are part of the vocabulary of ambitious psychiatrists), I would take advantage of our friendship and his good nature and ask him to arrange to come some other day. And now if the young lady—

"Miss Ruth Stein." She announced her name unctuously, as though her mouth were full of butter. Ah. I thought. an American!

"And now if Miss Stein and Mr.——"

"Albert Prengel."

"And Mr. Prengel will be good enough to decide who shall come back again today and who shall have an appointment later in the week."

"I don't have very much free time," Mr. Prengel said ungallantly and irritably, turning to my blonde patient, and for my benefit he added with the same degree of politeness, "It's not my fault you had your telephone disconnected."

"I am extremely sorry, Mr. Prengel, but there were very good reasons why I had to close my office for a long time, and was unable to provide a substitute. If Miss Stein is willing——"

I did not doubt for a moment that this unpleasant man was also an American. Obviously native.

"Of course, I'm in no hurry, and I live very near here, anyway," the plump young lady agreed with enthusiasm. Then she laughed noisily, as though she had succeeded in making a good joke. Only then did I notice how peculiar Mr. Prengel was. He growled to himself the entire time, but the sounds came not from his mouth, but from somewhere deeper. They were unpleasant sounds, and venomous, and were particularly audible when Miss Stein, who apparently irritated him, was speaking.

"Fine! Mr. Prengel will be kind enough to wait a moment while I arrange appointments for Mr. Kaminsky and Miss Stein, and then I shall be able to give him as much time as necessary. Won't you come in, Mr. Kaminsky?"

I led him over to the couch, asked him to sit down, and then I sat on the edge of my desk, as was my custom. Again I began speaking Czech.

"Now, tell me, what brings you here? I doubt that you

need medical help. If you do, though, my friend, we shall have to postpone your treatment for at least a month. I'm very busy now, and I shall be even more so in a short while."

"To tell you the truth, I *am* a patient. But that's only the second matter I want to see you about."

"Hm, that makes it complicated. I have it! Mr. Kaminsky, you come at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. All right? Fine, I'll put you down. Well, then, good-bye, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Miss Stein came in.

"I'd just like to ask you a few questions for my card-file, if you don't mind, Miss Stein."

"Ask anything you want, Doctor," she encouraged me, showing her white teeth and revealing a plump knee. Her teeth were flawless, her knee birthmarked. She said that she was thirty-two years old, that she was born in Texas, and that I was recommended to her by an Austrian painter, whom I actually did know. She herself was a painter, a fashion artist. She had had no serious diseases, and this was her first time in a psychiatrist's office. The reason for her visit—she smiled broadly as she knowingly pronounced the technical name—was her kleptomania.

"Just a moment, young lady; you let the doctor tell you what is the matter, if indeed anything is wrong. Just what do you mean by kleptomania?"

"I steal."

She said this so convincingly, so earnestly, and with such spontaneity that I could hardly keep from laughing out loud. I scribbled on the file-card and bit my lip. Finally I was saved by the door-bell; another patient, probably. Automatically I stood up and walked several steps to the door before I realised that it would not do to let this uninhibited lady see me spying on the waiting-room through

the peep-hole in the door. I turned on my heel casually as though I had merely been walking up and down the room, and observed that my patient's handbag, which she had previously kept in her lap, was for some unexplained reason now lying on my desk. Miss Stein was powdering her nose and had apparently placed her bag on the desk for that purpose. *Apparently*; the desk was only a short distance from her.

"Could you come day after tomorrow at twelve sharp? Can you get away from your office?"

"I can come at any time, Doctor; I'm not working just now."

"Then I'll see you day after tomorrow. Good-bye, Miss Stein."

I went with her to the door; then I returned to my desk and saw with astonishment that my card-file was in complete disorder. Miss Stein had needed only those few moments while I faced the door to throw a dozen cards into her handbag. But what value could they have for her if she had only time to seize a few cards at random from the file? Then I saw that she had taken only blank cards. My kleptomaniac had been unlucky.

The man who had rung the bell was no new patient, but a messenger with a telegram. I tore it open and read it while my lone patient, Mr. Prengel, paced impatiently up and down, tugged nervously at the cord of his pince-nez, and grunted viscerally. I looked at him searchingly and felt that he would be my most difficult problem. The telegram dealt with him. It read:

CONTACT ME IMMEDIATELY CONCERNING ALBERT PRENGEL
STOP DELICATE AND SERIOUS MATTER

DR ALEXANDER BROWNELL
TELEPHONE SC 4-0018

I pushed the crumpled message in my pocket, opened the door wide and, in the pleasantest tone of voice of which I was capable, invited the impatient man into my office.

"Now if you'll be good enough to take a seat, Mr. Prengel, I'd like a little information from you. How old are you?"

"Sixty-two."

"You look younger than that," I lied, and Mr. Prengel grunted, refusing the flattery. "Where were you born?"

"I can't see why that is important to you, but put Washington D.C."

"Have you had any serious illnesses?"

"Plenty. Pleurisy, typhus, rheumatic fever, and I have bad scars on my legs where I spilled boiling water on myself."

"Really? That was quite a while ago, wasn't it? You haven't been to a doctor in recent months for a serious illness?"

"Yes, I have. I went to a Dr. Alexander Brownell."

"Brownell, Brownell, that name seems familiar to me. Is he on a hospital staff?"

"No, he's a fool! I had terrible headaches, and he told me I was a hypochondriac, so I told him he was an idiot. In so many words."

"You're a bit hard on people, and particularly on doctors. Did this Dr. Brownell send you to me?"

"No, Colonel Howard, Robert Howard."

If he expected to surprise me, he was disappointed. But he did not appear as though that were his intention. He did not even look at me as he pronounced the Colonel's name. Nevertheless Howard would have been pleased if he could have seen me at that moment. Without moving a muscle I muttered casually:

"That's odd; I don't know any colonels or anyone by

the name of Howard. Are you an Army officer yourself?"

"No, I was once a diplomat, and I know Howard from the diplomatic service. If for some reason you find your acquaintance with Howard inconvenient, you needn't conceal it from me. I, too, know that he is in the secret service."

"Look here, Mr. Prengel, I still don't know what your trouble is, but you are the one who needs assistance. You need help from me, not I from you. If you cannot abandon your ill-humour and your scepticism I must ask you to find another doctor, before we go any further. It is a matter of complete indifference to me who sent you here, but I would like to make it clear to you that I know no Colonel—what's his name?—Howard? If you have the least suspicion that for some imaginary reason I am not telling you the truth you will be simply throwing money away by coming to me. If a patient does not have confidence in me I cannot treat him."

"And you never have to worry about obtaining his confidence? What if lack of confidence is the basis of his trouble?"

"In such a case a patient must control himself, particularly one who can do so when he wants to. Of course, if he is unable to control himself we treat him not in an office, but in an institution."

For the first time he looked into my eyes. First through his glasses, then without them. And his eyes were filled with fright. The word 'institution' did not arouse anger in him, but rather fear. And whatever part it played in his life, whatever its cause, this fear of an institution, of a place surrounded by bars and watched by guards, was not part of the rôle he was playing, but belonged to his real character. In a conciliatory tone, but still somewhat bitterly, he said:

"I can't help it, I hate American psychiatrists. I came to you because you are a foreigner."

"Do you have the feeling that American psychiatrists have injured you in some way? According to what you've told me you have never been to one. Or is this Dr. Brownell a psychiatrist?"

"They haven't done anything to me, but they took my daughter from me," he cried, almost in tears, and then those odd, angry sounds came from inside of him.

"What happened to your daughter?" I asked in a tone which did not attribute much significance to the question.

"She is in a mental hospital," he complained in a hurt voice.

I was completely sure that he was telling the truth. I had already formed my own theory about Mr. Prengel. I believed that his persecution pattern contained elements of genius. I suspected that the rôle he was playing was mostly that of himself, and that he had made little effort to make himself over in order to deceive me. This was what made my part the more difficult, a part which would have been easier to play if I had not known that he was an agent. Even with the best intention of talking with him and treating him as a patient I would continually ask myself: Is he working for the Americans or the Soviets?

"I am really sorry about that, Mr. Prengel. We shall have to return later to your daughter's story, but if you think that your own problems, which brought you here, are not directly connected with the fate of your child, we shall devote our attention to you alone for the time being. Do you think you could sum up for me what, in your opinion, you are suffering from?"

"Of course I can. I can't face people."

"I thought so." On most patients it makes a good impression if the psychiatrist pretends that he has already

divined their difficulty. "But tell me one thing. This inability has surely been with you for a long time. Why did you wait until now to seek medical help?"

"Because it's—it's getting worse."

"Did you come to that conclusion yourself, or did someone else suggest it? One of your friends, perhaps?"

"My wife died years ago, and I have no friends, only acquaintances. I reach all my conclusions alone."

"That is a rare ability, Mr. Prengel, and very encouraging. If you can examine your own acts objectively, that is the beginning of a cure. Now, look, my friend. Sit down comfortably in a chair, or even better, stretch out on this couch, forget where you are, and tell me what's troubling you. Talk completely freely, say whatever comes into your head; don't worry about how it sounds, as though you were talking to yourself. Begin in the middle or at the end if you want; just mention things in the order you think of them."

"I can't talk well when I'm sitting or lying down. I have to walk around."

"Fine! Then you can walk about the room. Do you smoke?"

"Only when I'm agitated," he said gruffly. Then he growled and started to pace about the edge of the room. He walked in a circle whose diameter seemed to grow ever smaller, until finally he seemed to be merely turning about on his own axis. It was unusual and somewhat painful to watch, but for that very reason convincing. I listened to him with only one ear; I had my own problem to solve: immediately after this deranged spy left should I telephone Colonel Howard's secret number? Was it significant or not that he mentioned Howard? Were there possibly other Americans whose job it was to test my discretion and alertness? Or did he perhaps work for the

other side, suspect something concerning my relationship to the Institute and to the Colonel, and wish to find out more by surprising me? Howard had advised me well when he told me not to worry about the special mission of each of my patients, and not to seek him out, not to report to him, and not to speak about him. But who could imagine that one of these clever patients would immediately pronounce the name of Colonel Howard? And what were the extraordinary events which alone would entitle me to call the Colonel's number? Did they include the telegram from my unknown colleague Brownell?

I did not look upon Mr. Prengel exactly graciously and, as he twisted about his small circle and reluctantly and with considerable effort unfolded the story of his dislike for humanity, my feelings for him became less and less warm. I was not up to the task he assigned me. Even though I had not concentrated on what he was saying, I had heard enough to have a high respect for the man's capacity to deceive. Where had he learned to analyse so convincingly the case of a man who revenges himself on humanity for his old, betrayed dream of human perfection? Who advised him, when speaking about his daughter, to describe the first signs of schizophrenia and at the same time not to recognise them as the symptoms of illness but as the products of irresponsible treatment by clever doctors? How did he know that loving parents usually describe the beginnings of insanity in their children in precisely this fashion? Was my original theory correct, that he was speaking of a real family tragedy? But, if so, how could anyone with such marked characteristics be useful for espionage? Or was he a doctor himself?

All of these questions, to which I knew no answers, led me farther and farther from the job which I had taken on.

And finally I committed an unforgivable error. I could no longer continue passively in this comedy, and all of a sudden I submitted to the desire to tell this unhappy man that I could see through him clearly.

Mr. Prengel not only grumbled, but he coughed and snuffled throughout his oration. He perspired freely and wiped his forehead with an enormous handkerchief which he pulled out of his trousers. My attention was instantly drawn to his pocket as he fished for his handkerchief; the cloth of his suit was stretched tightly over an object in his pocket, revealing its outlines clearly. I could no longer keep quiet.

"One moment, Mr. Prengel, I'm afraid I'll have to interrupt you. Are you sure you aren't concealing something from me? You are describing your loneliness as the by-product of self-defence. Right? You are isolated because by what you do and say, sometimes intentionally and sometimes subconsciously, you hold people at a respectful distance in the fear that they may humiliate you, injure you, and deceive you. But your self-defence never exceeds certain limits. It is primarily a verbal defence. Or have you perhaps fought with someone at some time?"

"I never fought, even as a child. Do I look like that sort of person to you?"

"That's just it, you don't," I cried triumphantly. "That's why I would like to know why your right pocket contains a revolver!"

The expression of this gloomy man underwent a profound change. He withdrew his hand slowly from his forehead, ran it across his mouth and down his chin; it was as though this movement had smoothed out most of the lines in his face, as though his expression had been ironed out. A smile further changed his face. It was a completely unexpected smile: shy, delicate, and pleasant.

One smiles this way not at people or at things, but only at visions. He stopped circling about, stepped over to the couch and sat down, and I was convinced that he would now throw off his mask and tell me who he really was and what he wanted. A new, completely different Mr. Prengel sat opposite me. A sage old man. A dignified patriarch. A wise hermit. Anger no longer bubbled from him. He reached in his pocket and brought out a toy pistol.

"I bought this for John. He's my daughter's little boy. He's six years old and worries about his cat."

Mr. Prengel lisped slightly when he was not angry. And he spoke very softly, perhaps in fear that if he spoke louder he might frighten away his unusual smile.

"What cat does your grandson worry about?" I asked uncertainly.

"It's a stray cat. No one wants her. People often kick at her. When I left the house today John was sitting beside her, singing to her. It was something he made up himself, about wicked people and good little cats. He told her he didn't know how to comfort her, so he was singing to her. That's why I bought him this toy.

"I'm terribly tired now. When do you want me to come back?"

I had an unpleasant feeling when I was left alone in my office. Time was in a frightful hurry, clocks were ticking too fast, and my heart and the blood in my veins were hammering too hard. Everything I had to do had to be done quickly, in a race with this furious tempo both within me and outside me.

I tore Dr. Brownell's telegram from my pocket feverishly and impatiently dialled his number. The telephone was answered by a child who babbled meaninglessly. I was annoyed, and begged the child to call mommy or

daddy to the phone. A gramophone played a distant background to our senseless conversation. Finally a woman came to the telephone and, without asking what was on the other end of the wire, scolded me and asked why I had called an hour too soon, when I knew that she had *lost the binocular adjustment*. This nonsense about a lost adjustment, and to a binocular, enraged me, particularly because I had the feeling of being in such a hurry. I answered the woman sharply, asking her if she would kindly be silent for just a moment so that I could at least tell her who I was. When she complied and I had told her my name and asked to speak to Dr. Brownell I heard a stifled cry of fright and then a stampeding sound, as though several pairs of feet were running madly. And then silence. I cursed, and my curse was answered by a man's voice, soft and sweet like syrup.

"Dr. Brownell speaking."

"This is Dr. Malik, how do you do. You sent me a telegram and I——"

"Oh, I hope you're not angry? I would never forgive myself if I had the slightest idea that I had upset you."

"You didn't upset me, but what is it all about?"

"It's about Mr. Albert Prengel, of course, but we can't talk about it over the phone."

"Why not, do you think someone may be listening in?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be surprised if Prengel himself was."

"Dr. Brownell, I'll be damned if I understand any of this. What do you want from me? When and where shall we meet?"

"At night, old man, when else? Your apartment would be the best place."

"At night in my apartment. Dr. Brownell, can you hear me clearly?"

"Perfectly, my friend! Why? Are you having trouble hearing me?"

"No, that's good; I just wanted to be sure that you could hear what I am about to say. I do not know whether I really have the honour of speaking with a colleague, but at any rate I am wasting time talking to a fool who thinks I am even stupider than he! Good-bye!"

I slammed down the receiver. And then I began to reproach myself. It was an error, a terrible error, to be caught off guard so! Was I always going to make mistakes like that? How could I repair the damage I had done?

The rush of events about me and the headlong flight of thoughts within me and the pounding of the blood in my head grew more and more frantic. I imagined that I was beginning to be hysterical and I decided to step out for a cup of black coffee and to think through carefully what had happened and what damage I had done. I opened the door to my waiting-room, and there, to my surprise, sat—Jiri Kaminsky.

"You've come back? Why didn't you ring the bell?"

"Excuse me, but I thought there was no need to ring when the door was already open."

A voice inside me warned: "Pull yourself together; don't make it obvious to him that you know why he returned!" And then the voice added: "All of these so-called patients are going to be doing this; they want to find out who comes to your office."

"What has happened, Mr. Kaminsky?"

"I can't come tomorrow. I completely forgot that I have to——"

"Oh, that doesn't matter," I interrupted him. "We won't make another appointment just now, but call me some morning soon and we'll arrange a time. I'm on my

way out just now; it's too hot to work. Where are you going? Perhaps I can go part way with you."

"I'm just going down to the bus, Doctor."

"Fine, let's go. I'm not going far, either. What are you writing, Mr. Kaminsky?"

"Just silly stories which I think have current interest. I am trying to write in English."

"Having any luck?"

"Yes, it's not bad. You see, these stories aren't particularly profound, just satires on the cold war."

"Satires or tragi-comedy?"

"I don't know what you call it. Look, I'll give you an example. I've just had an idea for a story about a man who goes mad here in New York, and sends someone behind the Iron Curtain a completely senseless telegram. The story shows what confusion the telegram causes in a police state."

"I can tell you, Mr. Kaminsky, that a crazy telegram can create a comedy full of errors right here in America. What is this telegram in your story to say, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter, just some obvious nonsense. Perhaps: 'He lost the binocular adjustment.'"

"*Binocular adjustment . . . ?* What made you say that? Why, that's— Excuse me, I'm going this way. Good-bye, Mr. Kaminsky, and call me up."

I did not drink any black coffee. I headed for the nearest bar and ordered a double shot of whisky.

I decided in favour of alcohol at such an unusual time of day because in the riot of thoughts, ideas, and memories an old piece of advice stood out: Go and have a drink to clear your head! I smiled at the words, which I had last heard as a child from the lips of a wary old Czech peasant. To clear my head! Yes, indeed, that was what I needed most.

The advice wasn't bad. As soon as I had taken a few

swallows the rush of events, time, feelings, and of my own soliloquy slowed down and I was able to think methodically. I imagined that Colonel Robert Howard was sitting next to me and that we were discussing what had happened.

"Well, Doctor, you bungled badly, but fortunately nothing is lost if you can pull yourself together. The basic condition is that you stop prying into things on your own account and stop making it clear to your patients that you know something. The worst thing is that Dr. Brownell, damn him, is completely sure now that something is going on in your apartment at night. But get that out of your head, too; I told you that just to be completely sure we are going to have your house watched. What else? Oh, that Prengel, the one who mentioned me? You denied ever having heard of me; that was quite right, you followed my advice. Now forget about that and in the future devote your attention exclusively to Mr. Prengel's inability to get along with people. Then once and for all get over the idea that your patients come for treatment with revolvers in their pockets. What does the *lost binocular adjustment* mean? Probably some password. And Kaminsky would like to know whether the password means anything to you. Since it doesn't mean a thing to you, forget it. So long, Doctor; get a grip on yourself. Don't make the heroes of the age of Stalin and the atom ashamed of you!"

I ordered another double whisky; this time it was not to clear my head, but to celebrate my discovery that I had gone to a lot of trouble over nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE next morning passed without event. None of my patients was expected, and none of them came to surprise me as Kaminsky had done; no new patients came, the telephone did not ring, and no telegram arrived to rouse me from my inactivity.

I did not know what to do with my free time. I did not have the patience to wander about to bars or to bore myself in an air-conditioned movie. I decided to visit my mother shortly after noon.

"Well, it's nice to see you unexpectedly for once. Would you like some good tea?"

"No, thank you mother. The main reason I came was to give you some money. I've been lucky in the past few days and made some money—well, a little extra, actually."

"Thank you very much, dear, but it doesn't make me very happy when you say you were lucky in connection with money."

"Why not?"

"You got the money from some rich patient who isn't very happy himself. It doesn't seem quite right for happiness to come from unhappiness."

"Well, that's the way the world is. Don't be so gloomy about everything. Anyway, if you had faith in me you'd consider my patient lucky to have chosen Dr. Arnost Malik as his doctor. What are you sewing?"

"I'm embroidering a chair-cover. Like the one we used to have in our living-room. I'm doing a lot of sewing now. Helen told me that you're getting married at last."

"Good heavens! I almost forgot to tell you. That's right; we're getting married in the autumn. When did you see

Helen, and, for goodness' sake, what language did you two talk together?"

"She was here this morning. Whenever she comes I'm glad I finally took your advice and had a phone put in. All I have to do is call up Mrs. Horakova over in the Czech quarter; she doesn't have anything to do and she doesn't live very far away, and she's glad to come and be our interpreter. But, Arnost, this time Helen asked me not to call Mrs. Horakova."

I was doubly displeased, at hearing about Mrs. Horakova and at the tone of the last sentence, which warned me that my mother had another surprise for me. I looked at her and wrinkled my forehead.

"What does all this mean? I saw Helen yesterday evening as usual, and she didn't say a word about seeing you herself. It always worries me when you and Helen cook up some secret. What did she want of you?"

"I don't really know, Arnost. It was hard without an interpreter. I know a little English and she knows a few words of German, so I was able to make out that you are going to be married. And she wanted to know why you and Elsa were divorced. I couldn't answer her because my English wasn't up to it, but also because I don't understand either."

My mother put down her embroidery, stood up, and walked over to me. She spoke sternly: "No, Arnost, this time you're not going to scold me, and I'm not going to be quiet. I'm frightened when you're irritated and angry, but I'm more afraid for you. And Helen is too. If you're going to be married she has a right to know certain things."

I was firm. "No one has a right to bully me. Not even you. Mother, I know you; you have some plan up your sleeve. This hasn't all happened just by chance. First Elsa

turns up in New York, calls you, and wants to talk to me. Then Helen gets in touch with you right away and wants to know why I was divorced nineteen years ago. For God's sake, whose business is it? I don't try to find out what Helen did ten years ago or whom she slept with four years ago."

"Oh, Arnost, don't talk like that!"

"I'm sorry, mother, but—— Well, it just seems to me it would have been a lot better if you had never come to the States. It's my fault; I brought you over, I urged you to come and live here. It was all my idea and I have to pay for it. But please, just leave me alone, don't worry about me, don't interfere in my life. I'm not a child any more."

"But I'm still your mother! Arnost, whatever you do, don't take away all my rights; don't ask me to be blind and deaf. Don't you think I see, and don't you think Helen sees, how unhappy you're making yourself?"

My forehead was wet with perspiration and my voice was hoarse as I spoke. "What kind of unhappiness do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"You know. Or maybe you don't know. When I called in at your place yesterday I could smell alcohol on your breath, and twice now when you've shown up at Helen's you've been drinking. What's the matter, Arnost?"

"Oh, mother, don't keep after me like that. True, I've been drinking more than usual recently, and I also have more to worry about, but you needn't look at me as though there were something wrong with me and prophesy disaster for me. That does me more harm than drinking. Let's not talk about it any more; my head aches."

"Would you like to take a nap here?"

"I shouldn't sleep."

"Well, at least take off your coat and loosen your tie and

make yourself comfortable. I'll get a stool to put under your feet."

"Whatever you want. You know, you used to worry about father this way. I don't really remember back that far, but don't you think you pretty much dominated father?"

"He didn't seem to think so."

"Maybe the best thing that can happen to a man is to have a woman run his life for him."

"It's strange that you should say that. I don't think it's so much a matter of obeying as of devoting oneself to one's duties. You hurt me not by bringing me to America, but by relieving me of all my duties. I don't know what I'm good for any more; I don't know why I breathe, eat, sleep, or walk about. I only hope you and Helen have a baby soon."

"That's fine, that's all I need! Mother, how old do you think I am?"

"Well, tell me, Arnost, why are you getting married, really? To have a home? You never cared much about a home. Can you tell me what it is you want, what you look forward to? It isn't money, even though you often act as though money were terribly important to you."

"Someone once said that one of the hardest things in the world is to know honestly what makes a person happy. Why am I getting married? Because Helen wants to. Why am I sitting here letting you take care of me as though I were sick? Because you want me to. You see, I too know what people want me to do. Now what are you doing? Mother, you're really trying to make it hard for me today."

My mother was sobbing. She trembled all over and her face was twisted into an odd expression which resembled a smile shot through with pain and distorted by a cramp.

But her eyes were dry. I got up and knelt down by her side, not out of sympathy but from a sense of filial duty, and took her wrinkled hands in my own.

"I—I never dreamed . . . even in the concentration camp, even when they tortured me, that a person could be much more unhappy free than behind barbed wire. I don't want to trouble you and I don't want to interfere with your personal freedom, even though it has already cost you all your genuine qualities. Why, I'm completely powerless!"

Only then did a feeling of sympathy grip me. "Did they torture you, too? You never told me that!"

"Oh, Arnost, that didn't hurt so much. It hurts more when a person loses himself in the shadow of his former self. We used to carry a bit of home with us; we had close friends who shared our lives as we shared theirs. And now we're alone. We have nothing to say to ourselves. We have nothing to look forward to. We have nothing to suffer for."

"Don't be unhappy like that, over nothing. Tell me what I can do for you and I'll be happy to do it. You can't go back. Our home hasn't even existed for a long time; you wouldn't recognise the people, and probably not even the countryside, and the language would be stranger to your ears than English. You wouldn't understand what the people there want from you, either. But you can't go on living like this, tearing yourself and me apart and crying into the night. You're wrong—just look around and you'll see hundreds, thousands of contented families. They live differently from the way we did, of course, but people here are happy nevertheless, perhaps happier than we ourselves used to be."

"I know all that, Arnost, and I understand why I can't go back. I never thought of going back because of some

fixed idea of home; it was because I wanted to run away from you, when I saw——”

“Mother, you’re talking as though you were my wife and not my mother. Only wives run away from their husbands and get divorces for such complicated emotional reasons. What do you want of me? Can you explain it to me at all?”

“Yes, I can. I don’t want you to try to escape. I want you to stop. I want you to be close to me, to Helen, to whomever you want—to yourself, if you still can be.”

“I really don’t understand you at all, mother.”

“All right. Look, Arnost, I don’t understand what happened to you when you left Elsa. And I’m not asking you to confide in me. But ever since then you’ve been running away. Whom are you escaping from, or what? You’re running standing still. You sleep sitting up for a while—that isn’t the worst part, either—then you wake up and at once you devote yourself to someone or something. Everything you do is for escape. You earn money to escape, you visit people for escape, and now you’re going to get married to escape. You’ve drawn me into your escape, but you won’t involve Helen in it, and you won’t take in anyone else; you’ll be alone until you die, hounded till you’re mad, if you don’t stop. Alcohol is also an escape, and after alcohol, what have you?”

I stood up and walked round her. Then suddenly I stopped when I saw that pacing up and down like this only confirmed my mother’s theory of my restlessness.

“I’m not going to argue with you, mother. I don’t care whether you’re right or not. For your peace of mind and mine I only want you to stop tormenting yourself. If my presence keeps you constantly unhappy, leave New York. I shall have money soon, enough to take care of your moving. You can live somewhere in a Czech community,

you can keep your own house, have a garden, take part in social life, or organise a Czech library; why, there are millions of things you can do and find satisfaction in."

"Don't ask me to do anything like that! I don't want to leave here."

"Why not?" I asked sharply, losing my patience.

"Because . . . I'm the one who will pull you out of it when your escaping finally destroys you."

"What a beautiful expression of your remarkable love for me! It is you who are doing the destroying with your stubborn and completely unfounded premonitions. Sometimes maternal love is hard to bear!"

"Oh, no, son, they aren't unfounded premonitions. Once before you behaved in this strange manner. It was just nineteen years ago. And I know what happened then—You, Arnost, threw Elsa too out of your house a long time ago, but she remained under your roof for a few days, like a dog."

I stepped over to the wall and leaned against it. I knew now *what* she knew and *who* had told her. For a moment I could not find words to express my vindictive fury and my shame.

I snarled, "That miserable bitch . . . she . . . told you about that? She, who——"

"Arnost, don't swear like that! After all it was Elsa who saved your life at the last moment! She cut the rope."

I hung my head, turned from her slowly, and went out without a word. I left the door open behind me. The way people leave who don't want to return. And my mother did not call me back.

What to do, where to go? I would have preferred to go and sit at a bar, but Helen's and my mother's suspicions that I was becoming a victim of alcohol (a suspicion

which I did not attempt then to analyse) instinctively prevented me. I walked for about five minutes in the heat and dampness until I was so exhausted and covered with sweat that I thought my legs would crumple under me. During the whole time I did not think of what had just happened. Or rather I thought only of unimportant details, such as the fact that I had left my coat and tie at my mother's, but that it really did not matter because I had my money in my trousers pocket.

Then I decided to enter the first place I saw, whether it was a store, a bar, or an apartment house.

It was a shooting gallery. Prizes were displayed round the walls: a doll, an umbrella, a candy dish, cheap kitchen utensils. I had once been a good marksman, but many years had passed since then. A negro woman, trying her luck, pressed the rifle against her bosom instead of her shoulder, and her lanky escort warned her anxiously, "Oh, no, honey, you'll hurt yourself that way." Some children were standing about, watching. The proprietor wore a red turban on his head and had a cigar in his mouth. I paid for fifteen rounds and hit the bull's-eye with twelve of them. "Mister, nobody's done that for over a month," the man with the turban flattered me. "Enough like you and I'd be out of business!" I was happy as a child. I debated which prize to choose, and changed my mind three times. I selected and rejected a doll and a saucepan, and finally took an umbrella.

I left the shooting gallery, waved for a taxi, and went home. The surprising fact that my hands had not shaken while I was shooting restored my self-confidence, and I lost my fear of drinking. In my mind I went over each step and each word I had heard from the spectators who had watched my inspired marksmanship. I was in a good mood, troubled only by the passage of time. It would be six o'clock

in scarcely a quarter of an hour. "I won't go to see her, I'll call her up and tell her I'm not coming," I said to myself forcefully, and again I felt self-confidence, observing that not only my aim but my will was unshakable.

At home I immediately got some ice from the refrigerator and poured a tall glass of Scotch and water. Then I called Helen at her office.

"Hello, Arnost. You're not coming to see me this evening, are you?"

Her voice was neither reproachful nor sarcastic; instead she sounded confused and embarrassed.

"No, Helen, I'm not coming. I have to——"

"You don't need to make explanations and you don't have to excuse yourself. I don't want to stand in your way."

Even then she did not speak sharply, her intonation merely said painfully and shyly, "I know all about it!"

"What do you mean, Helen, you don't want to stand in my way?"

"What are you yelling for? Am I scolding you or something? I know that people need to be alone sometimes. Now I can only talk a couple of seconds. I have to hang up."

"Helen, I wasn't yelling at you! And I'll come tomorrow for certain. I'm looking forward to it!"

"Silly boy! Good-bye."

I spent the next several minutes thinking of the odd tone of her words and the sharp way in which she hung up. Did Helen not want to see me this evening? God only knew!

The stale air in my apartment smelled slightly like water in a fish-pond. I turned on an electric fan and took off my shirt. A large, sluggish fly assaulted me, whining monotonously. At first I did not notice the fly; but when

its buzzing reminded me of my mother's words, and I again felt the spirit of our talk, I picked up a newspaper, rolled it into a stick, and began to stalk the fly. I swung at thin air. The sweat was pouring from me, and I began to imagine how ridiculous I must look, half-naked and out of breath, stubbornly running about the room beating the walls and the air. This feeling of looking ridiculous annoyed me. Several times I was about to give up, sit down, and drink, but again the desire to kill this tiresome fly and silence its whining overcame me. Finally it settled on the newspaper with which I had intended to end its life. I looked round for another suitable weapon but did not find one. At that moment I had an insane idea which I immediately carried out: I struck a match and lit the newspaper. The flame jumped into the air, the fly flew away, and I stared motionlessly into the fire. From the newspaper the flame spread to the table cover before I collected myself and emptied my glass of Scotch and water on it.

The smell of burned newspapers was added to the stale air of the room. It was impossible to breathe. Hastily I pulled on my shirt and left the house.

A long, fat airlines bus rumbled by. Enviously I watched the passengers looking out at the street. How I would love to fly away somewhere! For a long time I had had no wish that I could not easily fulfil. Then I told myself that everything would be possible when I had \$18,000 more from the Psychological Warfare Institute. Again I was in a good mood.

I found a luxurious French restaurant, but I was not angry when they refused to admit me because I had no coat on. Instead I walked a few blocks to a dirty Italian restaurant with air-conditioning. They let me in without question; two waiters led me to a table, and one of them

ceremoniously drew up a chair for me. They apparently confused me with someone else, because my waiter asked if I would have the same as usual. I said yes. But there were annoying flies here, too, and I remember nothing of the food or the wine which the waiter brought and which I scarcely touched.

Somehow I got to Central Park; I have no idea whether I took a bus or a taxi. It was cooler in the park. Two lovers embraced on a bench, and the odour of perspiration was in the air. I walked past them and lay on the grass. A large white cloud shaped like Africa sailed overhead. I wished I could fly high over the clouds. I closed my eyes and then I wished for nothing, and I was neither happy nor unhappy.

I fell asleep, bathed in breezes and absorbed in the lullaby of the grass and the trees. And I had a joyful dream, such as one dreams only once or twice in a lifetime. I was a boy on a raft of water-lilies, floating towards the pale-blue mountains on the horizon. The distances in front of me and the depths beneath me were not fearsome, they were sources of security; perhaps I had wings, perhaps I could breathe under water. And the whole world was made of blue and white and all space sang a song of the waters and the winds. I guided my raft by my own will, I floated in universal joy, as effortlessly as a flower smells and a firefly glows and a brook gurgles. I was alone and I was not alone; the water-lilies were my sisters, the mountains my guardians; the birds were my thoughts, and time was my soul. I was a navigator with orders from on high, and I felt unearthly bliss, a bliss which we long for, without being able to remember it, unable to imagine it, a bliss which we experience only in birth and in death.

When I woke up I was filled with sorrow that my dream

had been interrupted. Suddenly I looked at my watch; it was five minutes to eleven. Sobered by a spirit quite different from the one which had ruled my dream, I started to run. I was lucky; as soon as I left the park I found a taxi.

I arrived home at a quarter to twelve and ran up the stairs, filled with a mixture of eagerness and anxiety, for from the street I had seen a light in my apartment.

I found the door unlocked and I entered, my head whirling from my recent dream, my haste, and my impatient emotions. Carefully I closed the door behind me and looked furtively into the room, where I saw a young man with black hair and wearing dark glasses. Hearing the door close he took off his glasses, stood up, took two steps in my direction and shook hands. The way in which he stood up, his walk, his face with slightly feminine lines and premature wrinkles, but most of all his voice and the unusual greeting, "I wish you a good evening, Doctor," gave me the impression that I was standing in front of someone whom I knew well, but whom I had not seen for a long time.

"Good evening, Alfons," I welcomed my guest, taking his hand in mine. We smiled at each other, and I noticed that in my absence Alfons had been drinking my whisky, and that he had found a glass, some ice, and water. Even this informality did not seem strange to me.

"Forgive me, Alfons, for being late. I went to Central Park to get away from the heat and fell asleep."

"No, I won't forgive you, Doctor," he said, smiling, using my own favourite expression. And in that moment, in a sudden rush of emotion which was not happiness, not fright, nor surprise, but a combination of all three feelings, I saw in Alfons myself of twenty years before.

CHAPTER SIX

HE was of medium height and heavy-set. His voice was melodic but brusque, tinged now and then with a Prague accent. At first sight he did not appear ill or even tired; he seemed almost too relaxed, but from habit rather than insolence. He looked about thirty-two years old. He dressed like an American, from his shoes and his loud blue trousers, from the coat of the same colour thrown over the easy chair, to his striped shirt with short sleeves. He looked at me as at an old friend, and the natural way in which he poured himself a glass of Scotch as I sat down by him made it seem as though I had come to visit him and he was the host.

I began with the least probable of all questions, but actually it did not seem too out of place.

"Have the flies been bothering you?"

"I killed a couple of them, but there don't seem to be any more around. And how about you, Doctor, aren't you having a drink? Please make yourself at home."

This last question was the style of Czech student conversation, a type of which I had been extremely fond myself at one time and which never ceased to shock members of the older generation. I fell in with this familiar banter, which required that one be constantly on one's toes to keep up with the repartee.

"I'll have a drink, if you don't mind."

"But of course, Doctor; you don't have to ask."

"You are very kind, Alfons, but don't you think I ought to lock the door?"

"As you wish, only we shall ruin our reputations in the eyes of those who are watching us, since after all I don't look very much like a young lady."

"Do you think that we are so thoroughly watched?"

"I estimate our personal guard at fifty men. I don't know what sort of honours you are used to, Doctor, but this is quite sufficient for me."

"That makes me feel better, Alfons; I did something very foolish. A Dr. Brownell sent a telegram to my office, asking me to telephone him. When I called him he wanted to talk to me in my apartment at night. His pretext was so transparent and stupid that I lost control of myself, swore at him and hung up. In doing this, though, I probably confirmed his suspicions that I may have in my apartment the man he is looking for."

Alfons was interested and raised his dark eyebrows, but he was not the least bit disturbed. Nevertheless he abandoned his student wit and returned to it only occasionally.

"Has the man called you again?"

"No."

"Then he must be the Pig."

"The what?"

"The Pig is the nickname of a particularly eager agent. He isn't as dirty as a pig, as far as I know; he got his nickname because he is always poking his nose into something. He is stubborn and he works alone. He sniffs and digs around on his own until he gets wind of something. Not till then does he call the other pigs, his superiors. If it's the Pig, he'll come and have a look at your apartment *himself*. And in that case our unseen escort will take care of him. I wouldn't worry about him any more if I were you!"

"Oh, a Soviet agent, eh?"

"That's a naïve question, Doctor. The Pig is a good agent, and with a good agent you can never be entirely sure which side he serves best. You probably know that a good agent works for both sides, otherwise he wouldn't be

good, and so the only question is who gets more information out of him."

"Don't try to frighten me, Alfons," I said, not at all frightened. "I certainly wouldn't want to have someone killed in this house. I hope what you said about good agents doesn't apply to you. And furthermore, you're not behaving properly. Colonel Howard did not want you to take off your glasses in my presence."

"And you, Doctor, are inquisitive and talk too much. I wasn't supposed to know that it was Howard who arranged this business with you."

"Excuse me, I'm only a layman."

"It is not Alfons's job to solve problems. Alfons is to sleep. At least eight hours a day. That's why he's here. Doctor are you going to give me a sleeping pill today?"

"Take it easy with those pills. Let's discuss your insomnia. You don't look as though you need sleep. Do you know that some people who snore like a sawmill are fully prepared to swear that they didn't close their eyes all night?"

"That's quite possible. But the knowledge that such people exist does me no good. Look, Doctor, do you want me to talk frankly?"

"That's the best way to talk."

"You didn't choose to treat me either for scientific or for political reasons. You drew up a good contract with a certain nameless company."

I entered into the verbal duel. I said, "You're wrong, no contract was drawn up."

He had no choice but to keep up his end of the game that he had begun, but he did so rather impatiently.

"It's your error, Doctor; the contract was drawn up! You're old-fashioned if you think that in the business into

which your dilettante interests have taken you a signature is necessary to make a contract valid. If you are foolish enough to think of not fulfilling your part of the agreement you'll soon find out that it is impossible. But I come to you with a new proposal, not, if I may paraphrase the Gospel, to destroy the old laws, but to fulfil them. First tell me how much you are getting for treating me. Is that an indiscreet question?"

"Not at all. I get nothing for your treatment. But for the proposal, on the basis of which you are working, I am to receive twenty thousand dollars. I've been given an advance of two thousand dollars. What else would you like to know?"

"That's all. Now may I tell you something?"

"Please do."

"I know nothing about your proposal, but, believe me, the outfit we are working for doesn't pay a cent for *ideas*. They pay for deeds. Ideas, as they say in political jargon, are a smoke-screen to cover up what's really going on. You have received two thousand dollars—the rest is still problematic—for making available your apartment and your office, and of course yourself, for a very hazardous game. And now I'm offering you three thousand dollars in cash, without asking you to quit the game, if you will cure me according to my own instructions. Will you accept?"

"Forgive me, Alfons, I'm a terrible business-man and I don't catch on too quickly. I need more time before I can say yes or no. What are the instructions according to which I am to cure you of an illness whose principal symptom is insomnia?"

"Give me a prescription for those sleeping pills called Nembutal."

"And then what?"

"That's all. I'll come to see you and chat two or three more times, so that it will look as though we are continuing my treatment; then I'll disappear and you can collect the rest of your fee. After all, you didn't promise anyone *how* you were going to cure me."

"I'm sorry, Alfons, but I don't accept."

"Why not? Is three thousand dollars too little? Doctor, I haven't any more; and if you refuse you'll be sorry, because it is very doubtful whether you'll ever see the eighteen thousand they promised you."

I did not speak for several moments, listening much more to the tone of Alfons's words than to the words themselves. I looked at him with an emotion which he could not understand and which he therefore considered the first signs of my wavering. His efforts to persuade me grew more urgent, in his desire to strike while the iron was hot.

"If you take my suggestion, Doctor, you'll simplify this whole business. It is not my intention to frighten you, but, believe me, my visits put you in much greater danger on all sides than you can imagine. In this case there is no question of a doctor's honour, or a physician's duty, so . . ."

"One moment, Alfons. I know that I'm only playing at the rôle of a doctor. Except in your case. The conditions under which I am to treat you, that is, knowing nothing about you and asking the barest minimum of questions, would scarcely be acceptable to a conscientious doctor. You have every right to think of me as a quack. Nevertheless I did not choose to play in this farce only for money, even though I need it desperately. Something tells me that you aren't walking your tight-rope for dollars alone, and even less for ideas. You've told me yourself what ideas are good for, whether noble or merely clever.

Don't you think it would be a good idea to find out first what each of us is doing in this business?"

"Don't try your old tricks on me, Doctor! My father and my grandfather were both doctors, and I have a bellyful of wiles to outwit recalcitrant patients. It would bore me terribly if you started to confess to me your private problems, so that I would feel obliged to return the favour by confiding in you. I have nothing to confide to you, and you nothing to tell me. I'm really astonished to see how much you care about your medical reputation."

I did not answer him, but sat and looked at the floor, wrapped in thought. Alfons replaced his irritation with ridicule.

"Let us go back far into the past. As a small boy I often used to look through the keyhole into the bathroom, where my sister was taking a bath. She was seventeen, with a slender figure but very heavy legs. Those legs fascinated me, particularly above the knees, and one time I discovered that I could stroke them. It seems to me that in that keyhole and in my sister's fat legs you can best find the key to my insomnia. For that reason, Doctor, I'd be very much obliged if you would either work on that basis or reject my suggestion with one of your own.

"I didn't have a sister," I said, completely absorbed in my own thoughts, as though I had taken Alfons's story seriously. He looked at me with such contempt, and began to shift about in his chair so impatiently, that I was afraid he might jump up, pound the table with his fist, and then inflict another wound on my door as he dashed enraged out of my apartment. He soon calmed down, however, and listened to me carefully, not interestedly but cautiously, as though he had decided that he had underestimated me and should watch me closely.

"My cousin lived in our house, though," I went on. "I had been in love with her ever since childhood. I did not look at her through a keyhole while she bathed, but I brought her flowers and suffered terribly when she laughed at my attentions. I transferred my unrequited love, as often happens, to her father, who was known as a crude and simple doctor. At first he did not know what to do about my childish affection, but eventually he returned it with an extravagant friendship, such as only an eccentric recluse is capable of. I'm telling you this because nineteen years ago, when I was no longer a boy, but a grown man, married, and a doctor myself, I went to visit this uncle. By that time he was slightly senile and had only a handful of patients. I came in and made myself at home, as you did here today. I sat in his leather armchair, poured myself a glass of wine, and drank awhile before the old man realised that he had a guest. He was very happy to see me, but that time I did not return his kindness with friendship. I was biting and cynical, no matter what we talked about. And then, as though it were only an afterthought, I asked in an off-hand way if he couldn't help me to find a certain drug which was hard to get in Central Europe at that time, a violent poison. Much more violent, Alfons, than Nembutal. And then my senile uncle did a remarkable thing. 'Look, Arnost,' he said, 'I'm getting a little foolish in my old age, but I like you, and when you like someone you're blind sometimes and sometimes clairvoyant. If you've got to have that stuff, you'll get it by yourself. It will take you some time, but you'll find some. But don't ask me for it! It's neither smart nor kind to ask me to poison you with my own hands.'"

Not until I had finished did I look carefully at Alfons. He was sitting motionless with his hands in his lap, his mouth opened slightly in embarrassed astonishment, and

his eyes were animated with fear. He twitched suddenly, smiled briefly, crossed his legs, and asked softly, trying without success to assume a jocose tone, "Well, tell me, Doctor, why did you want just that kind of poison when as a doctor you surely had hundreds of drugs easily available which could have put you out of your misery painlessly?"

"I'll answer by asking you a question, Alfons. Why does a man who plays with death every day decide not to throw himself under a train, to drown himself, to hang himself, or to get himself involved in such a complicated situation, in his dare-devil profession, that he will lose his neck? Why does he plan instead to end his life only with sleeping pills?"

"There are several explanations," he answered in a high-pitched, forced tone. "Even people who play with death can be cowards, afraid of a painful death. It's one thing to risk one's life, and quite another to plan suicide. For another thing, your adventurer may be so tired out by his insomnia that he does not really think of suicide, but only of a long, long sleep. And finally, having poison in your pocket in the shape of apparently harmless sleeping pills is a source of great strength. Against your enemies and against your own masters, as well as against yourself. With poison in his pocket a man is absolutely free. Of course, it's a long way from a suicide plan to actually committing the act."

"Not always, Alfons. You overlook the impatience of a potential suicide. For example, I didn't go elsewhere for my poison, although I could surely have found it within a week. That same day I tried to hang myself, and I almost succeeded. In the very last moment, however, the woman who was then my wife found me."

"Do you tell this story to all your patients?"

"It's not a story, and you're the first person I've told it to."

"Well, I'm flattered, I'm sure. Only I don't understand why you honoured me with it. After all, our relationship is not similar to that between you and your relatives."

"No, you're right. But nevertheless you are closer to me than I was to my old uncle."

"Listen, Doctor, I've seen a number of clever demagogues in my life, but you put them all to shame. You can say complete nonsense so convincingly that you would confuse the most obstinate doubter. We've never seen each other until today. How can I be close to you?"

"When I say close I don't mean a feeling of friendship, although that is also present; I have in mind a special kind of inquisitiveness. Alfons, it's possible that I need you more than you need me. If you're prepared to abandon your original mission that's all right with me; I'm also quite ready to forget what I was supposed to do. Or better yet, to continue, but only to our own mutual advantage. My proposal is that we clarify together the situation we are in, primarily why we are in it up to our necks, and then decide what remains for us to do."

"That's an old trick, Doctor; you just want to get information out of me."

"It's no trick, Alfons."

"Why choose me for this experiment, then?"

"Perhaps I'm foolish and perhaps it will seem improbable to you, but in you I can see myself of two decades ago. Wait, don't interrupt me! I don't perform miracles, and I'm certainly no clairvoyant, but what I'm about to tell you no one else in my position would have seen so quickly. It's clear to me that you've had your fill of secret jobs and adventures and that you are considering suicide. How do I know this? Only because you have some of

my former character and I myself was once in a similar situation. I may be wrong, of course, and it's perfectly possible that I will find no solution for you and that you will be unable to clarify anything for me, much less help me. But my experiment is worth a try. I don't care who you are. I'm not interested in whether you're a Czechoslovak delegate to the United Nations or working for the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington, or whether you're a refugee, a business-man, or a professor. It makes no difference to me what they want of you, whether you're to find out what Gottwald likes for supper, or whether you're supposed to kidnap Stalin or find out how many atomic bombs the Soviets have. What I am terribly anxious to find out first is what state the world is in. We two know more than other mortals about the conspiracy against humanity. You know about this particularly well; I sense it, and I have no doubt that you know an enormous amount. But you have no point of departure, as I have. On the other hand you're the first person in many, many years who has made me want to talk without concealing anything, to show myself for the first time who I really am, where I am going, and whether I still have anywhere to go. I was endowed with an unusually strong will. And when, nineteen years ago, I looked into the conspirators' laboratory and saw them, under the most various names, slogans, ideals, and false ideals, digging the grave of our world, and when I overcame the impulse to kill myself, I relied on my will and forbade myself to think in honest terms. I tried to vegetate instead of living. It works, Alfons. You eat, drink, cohabit, read, sleep, and dream, you speak the language of the blind and ignorant and you understand it; but somewhere, very deep, a desire still smoulders to be absolutely yourself, in spite of the fact that you are part of the con-

spiracy. Must we really keep up our pretences until we die, do the conspirators have all parts of the world under their flag, is there no other way of life for us who *know* than this game of blind man's buff?"

I spoke softly, as though I had a fever, and Alfons listened attentively. He was serious, pale, and sad, and for the first time began to show fatigue. He said wearily, "I suppose the Devil sent me a doctor like you! I can see now that you're not trying to deceive me, that you mean seriously what you say, but that makes me all the less optimistic. I want to sleep, a long sleep without nightmares; that's why I'm here, that's why you received me here, that's why I'm offering you more money out of my own pocket. But you've made up your mind that I am deceiving you. You're really clever, and it would be surprising, if I had the time and the interest for your personal difficulties. You're so wrapped up in your own troubles that the moment you stop using that brain of yours, to which I give all due respect, you talk in symbols and allegories like a fortune-teller. What do you call a conspiracy? Politics?"

"No, Alfons, it's the way of thinking that politics causes. Particularly the politics of the last decades."

"True, but what concern of yours is this way of thinking? You don't live behind the Iron Curtain, where they have a special ministry to hand out reason. Nor are you one of my colleagues, who really are the agents of perverted truth, victims of some sort of grand conspiracy against reason. You're a perfectly quiet citizen; you live, or you can live, in an environment where two and two are still four, where a letter contains information and not code, and where a girl goes to bed with you because she wants to, and not in order to find out what you did at exactly twelve noon yesterday; where laws are good or bad,

but still laws and not myths, where children play, fight and cry, but where they don't turn in their parents to the police, and where the schools teach the laws of arithmetic, and music, and not the laws according to which social classes kill each other off in the name of social progress. Why do you stick your nose into this laboratory, and then find that you're horrified at the results? Fine, you have a job which is not part of your peace-time world, and it makes you dizzy. Get the job over as quickly as possible and then run as far as you can from politics and its secret services. Listen to me, please, you have time. You too can become involved in this web, and it will choke you one day. But don't try to escape. Give me my sleeping pills. I want to sleep, I must sleep.

"Don't forget to drink, Alfons. Scotch is also a good soporific. You'll sleep, there's no question about that; the important thing is that you wake up. That's one of our whole problem. Your advice is good, but at least we will fear, but I can't use it. It's too late. I know too much. Two and two may still be four, but the world may be clouds in the sky. You have said before briefly felt it exists in half the entire world. I have said myself that the soldiers of the whole world, who are for the time being fighting each other, are the agents of perversion. Do you really think that this situation will result in a moral, and irreparable deterioration of reason?"

"Maybe it will, maybe it won't—I don't know. I don't care. The entire world goes mad, and the world goes mad too, otherwise you're the only crazy person. Do you want from me?"

"How did you come to work in this system of Voluntary?"

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"Just one more question, Alfons. Are you sure you didn't take up this vicious work because of a special, indefinable, and incomprehensible need to avenge yourself for something which that very system once did to you? Didn't you jump all of a sudden with both feet into something from which you had previously defended yourself and which you hated?"

He raised his head sharply, was about to say something, and then waved his hand and mumbled, "Maybe. Let's forget it!"

"All right, we'll leave it for the time being. You know Alfons, I only guessed that because the espionage system ruined my entire life twenty years ago. And ever since then I have had a desire to enter that system. As a conspirator, an avenger. Someone who can reduce its madness to absurdity."

"That's nonsense, of course. The system is not only a type of madness which you could intensify; it is absurdity itself. And in spite of that it contains a certain logic. Would you make me some coffee, Doctor? I'm terribly tired, and I still can't sleep."

"Yes, I'll make some coffee, and in the meanwhile you put your head down on the table. Here, I'll give you a pillow. That's it, now get some rest!"

When I came back from the kitchen with the coffee, Alfons was asleep. I sat down as quietly as I could by him, and sat without moving and watched him. I felt a tenderness for him. I was happy and curious and thankful as I looked at him; I was convinced that I had met my own double from the years of my youth.

After about twenty minutes of quiet sleep and regular breathing, Alfons began to twitch his shoulders, toss his head, and groan. He shouted some incomprehensible

words. Then for the next twenty minutes he slept so deeply that he seemed to have fainted. I was barely able to hear his breathing. Then came another nightmare. I was certain that he would wake up, for he had pushed the pillow far across the table and every few moments hit the hard table top with his chin or forehead. And the words he mumbled became more intelligible. In Czech he told someone to shut up. Then he spoke English; to my surprise it was good English, with a British accent. He told someone to fetch his suitcase, soap, and razor-blades. Very sharp blades. Finally he spoke Russian; it was much worse than his English, but I had lost interest in Alfons's knowledge of languages, because all my attention was focused on what he was babbling. In Russian he pleaded with someone, as though begging for mercy.

"I . . . comrades, it wasn't . . . I didn't . . . lose the binocular adjustment."

I cannot explain why at the very first moment that meaningless sentence about the lost binocular adjustment alarmed me so. He was the third person from whose lips I had heard this, and at once I lost my patience and my affectuate curiosity. I began to shake Alfons and try to wake him.

"How long did I sleep?" he asked in a pleading tone.

"Less than an hour. You didn't sleep very calmly."

"That's what happens. I sleep an hour, maybe two, I toss about like a fish out of water, and sometimes I fall out of bed. When I wake up I seldom get back to sleep."

"Calm yourself. I'll give you some sleeping pills or——"

"Doctor!" he cried, thankful and enthusiastic.

"Don't get excited. You'll get two from me today, maybe three. Next time you'll get more."

At first he made a sudden gesture, indicating that he wanted to say something; then he thought better of it and

said, curiously satisfied, "Fine, three tablets, all right?"

"Alfons, you're not going to get any more. I know what you have in mind. Don't try to fool me; you're too much like me. You're planning to keep these pills until you have about twenty of them, aren't you?"

✓ He was stunned, so stunned that he didn't even act disappointed. He cursed, but his curse contained admiration for me.

"Damn it, Doctor, you're beginning to interest me! I can't understand why you aren't rich if you can get information out of people so well. Before I went to sleep you said something about the espionage system ruining your life. I'm ready to listen to this story, if you'll make it short and give me the pills afterwards."

"Don't go so fast; I've already told you I don't think too fast! How long will it take you to get home from here?"

"About half an hour by taxi."

"You can get a taxi at the corner any time. Fine! Before you go I'll give you two pills. They take about an hour to work. But you'll have to swallow them here, so that I can see you."

He hesitated. He had another idea, but this time could not guess what it was. He agreed without enthusiasm.

"I'm not going to tell you anything about myself today, Alfons. Tomorrow. Can you come?"

"I hope so. I never know what the next day may bring, but I'll try. Where are the pills?"

"In my pocket."

"How come? Do you keep your medicine chest in your pocket?"

"Not exactly, but I prepared these pills while you were asleep. Alfons, you understand English, don't you?"

"Badly," he said hastily. "Of course, I can get along in

it. I was in England during the war, in the Czechoslovak Army, but I——”

“I’m not interested in the details, and you’re not supposed to talk about them. Something else—— What does the lost binocular adjustment mean?”

He jumped as though someone had spilled boiling water on him.

“My God! Where did you hear that?”

“You mumbled about a binocular adjustment in your sleep. In Russian. Before that you spoke English. And not bad at that. But that’s all your business. I just want to tell you that you are the third person in the past few days who has said something about a lost binocular adjustment.”

“Who said anything like that, and when?” he asked sharply, distraught, and afire with impatience. I told him briefly what I had heard on the telephone when I called the number in Dr. Brownell’s telegram, and the circumstances under which I had heard the same words from the lips of Jiri Kaminsky. Alfons was very much disturbed. He began to pace around the room nervously. Finally he said indecisively, “That makes no sense at all.”

“Why are you so upset if in your opinion—and in mine, too—the methods of the espionage system don’t make any sense anyway?”

“But there’s some logic in those methods, even if it’s tipped upside down. Look here, the lost binocular adjustment is the last order from Moscow concerning me personally. The order was intercepted and deciphered, only this time the code was in code. We don’t know yet what is meant by the meaningless phrase: the lost binocular adjustment.”

“Well, then, I’ll have to call Colonel Howard’s secret number.”

"No, don't do that," he begged. "You aren't supposed to make any investigations. It might very easily turn out that I couldn't come to see you any more."

"And are you still anxious to come, even though you weren't successful with the pills?"

Warmly, and a bit hesitantly, he said, "Why, of course, Doctor. You know I want to come back."

"I believe you, Alfons, and for that reason alone I shan't call the Colonel. Although I know that I'm in a fine mess."

"In what kind of a mess? Why do you think that?"

"All of this makes a certain amount of sense to me, after what you've told me. If an agent tells me the most secret password of the most secret Soviet service, that agent must think that, whatever service he is in, he is working for Moscow. And, what's worse, he must have some reason for thinking that."

Alfons blanched and sat down weakly, as though he had a cramp in his leg.

"Doctor, I hope you don't think——"

"I forbid myself to think anything. I am interested only in the two of us. I want us to come to some conclusion. I want us to be allies. I want us to steal a march on all of them!"

Alfons did not answer; he stood up, put out his right hand, and pressed mine until it hurt.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I SLEPT little, but I slept deeply, dreamlessly, next awoke refreshed. My meeting with Alfons had enormously fortified my self-confidence and given direction to my acts.

All at once I had my own plan. I was like a roulette player who plans to win not because he has the mad idea that he has found the secret of the wheel and discovered its system, but because he has found someone else to play with him, someone whose participation in an agreed betting scheme will double the probability of winning. I had a great advantage over the unfortunate fools who believe in a hidden order of chance and seek the key to it. My 'system' consisted in the fact that I denied the existence of a key to any such group of rules. The whirl of events in which I found myself added up to chaos. And winning, in my system, did not mean organising this chaos, but rather breaking out of its vicious circle and destroying it. It was useless to make any suppositions. To consider two different possibilities meant to overlook a third, the very one which would surely come about.

The only patient I was expecting the next day was Ruth Stein. She was to arrive at noon. She did not come, of course. Nor telephone. None of my new patients seemed to have any faith whatever in the telephone. In place of Miss Stein I had two new, unannounced visitors. The first was a Slovak who said he was the owner of a woodworking shop, and the second a Pole who claimed to be a dentist. The Slovak was suffering from superstitiousness which had grown into an obsession, whereas the Pole came to me with the fixed idea that he was going to kill his mother-in-law. This time I did not ask who had sent them, and I refused to take them because of 'a large number of old patients'. They did not see this great number of patients in my empty waiting-room and they did not urge me to change my mind. Apparently their mission ended with their first visit. But my suffering Slavs made friends quickly in the waiting-room and left in friendly conversation as though they had known each

other all their lives. They spoke a strange language, in which Slovak, Polish, and English were overshadowed by German. Apparently this was successful.

Soon after these two had left my bell rang again. It was Jiri Kaminsky, on his second unannounced visit.

"I know you won't be able to see me, but——"

"On the contrary, Mr. Kaminsky, I can see you. One of my patients, who was supposed to be here now, has just broken her leg, so I'm free. Come on in."

And I said to myself, That's right! Don't try to understand chaos, just add to it!

My cordial invitation embarrassed Kaminsky.

"Doctor, you're very kind. I really don't know whether I dare bother you, if——"

"Why, we're old friends, Mr. Kaminsky, and fellow-countrymen too. As I remember, you had two things on your mind. Start by telling me about the first, which brings you here not as a patient."

"Well, as you know, I am writing a novel. And one of the characters is a doctor. A psycho-analyst. It occurred to me that you might be kind enough to give me certain important technical details."

I did not answer yes or no. I looked at his hands; he did not know what to do with them. He put them behind his back, then he shoved them in his pocket, then he folded them, then made fists, and then opened them again. They bothered him. I occupied them by offering him a cigarette, which he gratefully and eagerly accepted. As I held a match for him I saw that the ends of his fingers were burned.

"What happened to your hands, Mr. Kaminsky?"

He dropped the cigarette on the floor. I picked it up and he stammered, "I burned myself—I'm awfully clumsy—and——"

"I would say that someone burned you. Whoever it was went for your nails. And what was the other thing, Mr. Kaminsky, which brings you here?"

Immediately he threw off his embarrassment. He crushed his cigarette out in the ash-tray, put his hands in his pockets, and frowned. His eyes avoided me. He tried to speak softly but he sounded defiant.

"I haven't been feeling well recently. It's not the heat. I'm afraid I'm going to do something. Some outrage: that I'll get into a fight, that I'll start to scream in the street or in some public place. And the reason, which you can believe or not, is political. I can't handle it myself, I need a doctor. But I have no money for treatment."

I had certainly not expected that one of my new patients would tell me he had no money for treatment. This contradicted the picture Colonel Howard had painted, but on the other hand it fitted in completely with my theory of the inscrutable fellowship of nonsense. I decided that Kaminsky, too, should hear something unexpected.

"That's perfectly all right. I'll be glad to treat you for nothing. But please sit down!"

He did so almost too quickly as though with relief at having attained what he wanted. Gratefully and convincingly he said, "You're extremely kind—and to think I was stupid enough to be afraid of you! Thank you, Doctor, thank you very much. Perhaps in six months or a year I can start paying you—"

"Please, no more talk about paying! Your case interests me. When did you last have the desire to cry out or see a scandal?"

Kaminsky did not answer immediately. Instead he looked away from me, as though looking for something. Then he stepped over to the couch and lay down, folded

his hands on his chest, looked at the ceiling, and said timidly but imploringly, "Would you mind if I told you my story from beginning to end?"

"If I understand you correctly you mean that you don't want me to interrupt you with questions. Of course, I'll be glad to, but first I must ask you a few details. Who has given you psycho-analytical treatment before?"

"No one. Why?"

"Because you automatically assumed the position in which the majority of psycho-analysts like to treat their patients."

He smiled nervously. "That was an accident. I am one of those people who can't look into someone's eyes for very long when they talk. It's not always right to say that such people have bad consciences. I particularly can't stand to look at you, Doctor. But I certainly can't have a bad conscience toward you, at least not yet."

"I'm terribly sorry, but we'll have to spend some time on these details. Large trifles are the most important thing to a doctor. Have you ever analysed the unpleasant feeling you have from a direct view of someone? Could you tell me, for example, why you can't look me in the eye?"

"To tell you the truth, I haven't thought too much about it. The feeling is like shame. But otherwise I am not reserved. I can look animals in the eye. Only . . . the look of people is to me something like . . . like the burning bush in the Bible. Do you really think it is so important?"

"I don't know yet. Now tell me your story. Apparently you have it already well thought out."

"Yes, I have," he admitted, and again his voice sounded defiant.

"It all actually began during the German occupation,

shortly before the war started. I got permission to go to Italy to study. My brother, who is an engineer, was convinced that I was not going to return, and that somehow I would make my way to France or England. He had plans for a new type of aeroplane which some Czech engineers had worked out shortly before Czechoslovakia was divided up. He had hidden them from the Germans. He tried to persuade me to take these plans out of the country, and put them at the disposal of the French or British Government. I couldn't make him understand that I did not want to exile myself, that I was going to come back, and that I wouldn't dream of taking such things out of the country and giving them to a Government which had caused all our unhappiness at the Munich conference. My brother didn't believe me, and because he is an irresponsible dreamer he put the plans into my luggage without saying a word to me about it. At the Czech-German frontier, of course, when they inspected the baggage, the Gestapo discovered the drawings and I went straight to prison. My parents, and particularly my brother, who caused it all, spared no money to bribe the German investigating agencies. Because they were able to pay large bribes, and because the war had not yet started and money was still worth more than Aryan honour, I was released after five weeks and allowed to go on to Italy. The plans, whose military value apparently existed only in my brother's imagination, somehow disappeared. Then when my train was on the Austrian-Italian frontier a Gestapo guard burst into the compartment I was in, armed to the teeth. They surrounded a young, trembling Polish girl and barked at her, ordering her to leave the train with them. I got up, went up to one of the black-shirts, and asked him calmly, 'Why should this girl go with you?' He looked at me as though he had seen a ghost, he was so startled

by my audacity. And, as I remember, he asked sweetly, 'Does it interest you?' Then he shouted, loud enough to make the windows shake, 'You come with us, too!' So instead of going to Italy, I found myself in jail for the second time."

"Kaminsky stopped talking, turned his gaze from the ceiling towards me, and looked at me out of the corner of his eye for a moment. I wondered what was to follow, but nothing followed. Finally my patient asked almost impatiently, "What do you make of it, Doctor?"

"I don't know, because I really have no idea what sort of answer you expect. All I can say is that I would not have wanted to travel in Germany with you while Hitler was in power.

Kaminsky jumped up quickly, as though a bee had stung him, and was now facing me with his legs wide apart, trying his best to look directly at the tip of my nose and not into my eyes. He was in such a bad mood, and so irritated, that I could no longer recognise the respectful, shy man he had appeared a few minutes ago. And I was convinced that he was sincerely annoyed, that none of it was sham.

"I'm terribly, terribly disappointed. Even you react like everyone else. This experience, my dear Doctor, should not be received with sarcasm or jokes! This is a very serious matter!"

"For goodness' sake, calm down, my friend! If you will permit me to ask you a few questions I am sure I shall uncover the thing in your story which escapes me at present. You are a writer and I have no doubt of your narrative talents, but even the greatest authors can sometimes find implications in their own stories which others cannot see. What you have told me, and principally the way in which you told me, is not only tragic; it is also

comic. And I cannot understand why the comical side of your story bothers you so."

He sat down; perhaps I had calmed him, perhaps I had merely silenced him. I offered him another cigarette. He accepted it but forgot to thank me for it. Then he said pensively and resignedly, "You're right, I don't know how to tell it. Every story has to have a basic, unifying word, a sort of nucleus. And apparently I can't locate that nucleus."

In that moment it became clear to me that, in spite of everything, this man was simply mad. And for this reason I quickly asked about precisely that which had given rise to my belief, "And what is that single word which you have not yet emphasised or have failed to locate?"

He stood up again and began to walk round. He reminded me of my other pedestrian patient, Albert Prengel. Only, by contrast, he did not talk as though each word were painful for him; he did not speak gruffly and bitterly, but enthusiastically, like a fanatic.

"I should expect that in times such as these everyone would ask the same *WHY?* which I calmly and candidly asked the Nazi soldier who was arresting that young Polish girl. Doctor, what would the world be today if at that time, not one individual, but thousands and millions of people had quietly but audibly asked *WHY?* And where will we all end up if we don't soon, without regard for the consequences, come out with our irrevocable and straightforward *WHY?* I live at the moment in a world where freedom still exists, and I am fond of that world, I am perhaps too fond of it with a sort of terrified love. And because of my love and because of my fear I often want, not to whisper, but to shout *WHY?* to all corners of the earth, because . . . I am so frightened . . . I fear so

for my last refuge! I have a desire to fight with all those who do not want to see or hear, to cry out and to defy them, not for truth and justice, but out of fear for half the entire world against which the flood waters are lapping. And now tell me: should I even try to treat this mental disease, or whatever you choose to call it? Does this not mean treating something which is natural? No, I can't handle it any longer! That's why I've come to you."

He stopped walking. He smiled sadly and almost looked into my eyes. I lit myself a cigarette and thought. Kaminsky was patient. He stood a long time waiting for my answer.

"Mr. Kaminsky," I announced, measuring my words and tone carefully, "you don't need a doctor. Your impulses are only impulses which you won't give in to. In my opinion you won't cause any scandal, nor will you start to shout out of a clear sky, as though someone were murdering you. I think you are still in good order, perhaps too good. For a moment I was not entirely sure about you, but that uncertainty quickly vanished. That, if I might say so, is the medical side of your problem. As far as the problem itself goes, apart from your own person, I would like to add—only as an ordinary observer of political events and as an occasional reader of the newspapers—that you have hit upon a very important question. This question disturbs not only you but also, for example, me. But you are a writer and in the end you won't call out your urgent *why?* from the housetops, but you'll clothe it in a novel instead. Now I should like to ask you—not, of course, as a doctor, but as a person curious and interested in literature—whether writers don't exaggerate a little in discovering and solving problems. Is the free world really so horribly threatened that you want to cry

out with fear? And if it is—and please, I'm not saying it isn't—what actually is threatening it? Communism and the Soviet Union?"

Kaminsky let out his breath in a long sigh. Either he was relieved to hear that I considered him completely sane, or he was entranced by the opportunity to talk on the subject I had asked about. He sat on the couch, crossed his legs and began to look feverishly through his pockets for a cigarette. He did not find one, and I let him continue searching for a few moments to learn what sort of craving this was for cigarettes which he put out after a few puffs. When he found none he asked shyly, "Could I ask you again for——?"

"Of course," I interrupted him, "excuse me. Here's a whole packet, and some matches. Just help yourself!"

"Thank you very much. Actually, I've just taken up smoking."

"So I can see."

He was startled, looked at my nose instead of my eyes, and coughed violently.

"You asked, Doctor, what is threatening the world, in my opinion. Is that right?" he asked somewhat vaguely, looking over his shoulder as though he were trying to find the matches again. He soon found them. "I would say that it is threatened not by the external evil which is pressing on it, but by its own defence. In many cases a fly would escape from a spider if it did not wind itself tighter and tighter in the cobweb trying to get out. We are defending ourselves from the destructive forces around us by becoming more like them internally. In a short time we shall not differ from the enemy, and we shall continue to fight him only through inertia."

"That is a remarkable opinion, Mr. Kaminsky. The only thing that bothers me is that it is too literary. Give

me facts from politics and life, and not from literary Utopias!"

"Fine, I'll give you facts," he said enthusiastically, as though there were nothing he would rather do. "Take the recent history of our own Czechoslovakia. When Hitler came to power the thing we disliked most of all in his régime was racism, which mortally threatened us and all the Slav nations. Yes or no? But when Hitler's power reached its zenith, when we lost the frontier regions, we began to use racism to defend ourselves against the Nazis. After Munich our Medical Association and the Bar Association voted by an absolute majority to exclude all Jewish doctors and lawyers from their organisations. This was not done under pressure, it was supposed to be self-defence. Then what happened? The war came and the Government and the President went into exile, and we even had a small Army. What did they fight against, the President and the Government and that little Army? Primarily against the brutality of the occupying Powers. Fine. But that Government, or the President, or the generals in exile, I don't know exactly who it was, with the approval of the highest British authorities, and in the name of national self-defence, murdered the flower of our nation, the greater portion of the Czech intelligentsia, when in 1942 they sent parachutists from London to Prague to kill the German Protector Heydrich. That was legalised brutality, because everyone who planned the assassination knew that the hostage system was being used in Bohemia; the violent death of the Protector would mean the loss of thousands and thousands of the finest Czech lives, while it would cost the Nazis only one lousy gangster. But that's not all. The entire free world pitied us for Munich, in which, of course, it had as important a part as the non-free world. And we felt like martyrs throughout the whole war. The war was

hardly over, however, before we, our Government, and the President, arranged a new Munich in our own country; without a conference, and without a plebiscite, we turned the population of Carpathian Ruthenia over to the Soviets. And we did this, too, in 'self-defence'."

"That's enough, Mr. Kaminsky. Your examples are persuasive, but——"

"There's no 'but', Doctor," he interrupted me harshly. "In fighting the devil we build our own hell."

"Yes, I agree. But you don't mean to say you came to me with the Tolstoyan question, 'What are we to do now?' Mr. Kaminsky, if I were absolutely sure what really brought you here, I might be able to find an un-Tolstoyan answer to that question."

"Do you think that I have made up some sort of imaginary tale for you?" he asked, thoroughly amazed.

"I'm not saying that," I answered evasively. And in a moment I continued, "Have you ever heard of homœopathy? It is a medical system based on the discoveries of Samuel Hahnemann which was once very popular and still has many practitioners. The basic idea is *similia similibus curantur*—like cures like. If we turn from medicine to politics and daily life we can see that politicians use Hahnemann's principles more than doctors. One is for ever reading warnings in the newspapers that America, for example, in defending itself against totalitarianism is using more and more totalitarian methods. But let us leave politics, and look at the ordinary man in the street, who has no political power. Let us take Mr. Jiri Kaminsky, for example, who is disturbed to the bottom of his soul by the cold war. Mr. Kaminsky's diagnosis is correct, and I think he is frightened both as a man and as a writer. But is it not possible that Mr. Kaminsky is treating his fear, without medical help, according to the

principles of homœopathy, by knowingly or involuntarily serving his enemy?"

"Pardon me, but I don't at all understand what you're saying!" he said, more startled than as though he really did not understand. And I, delighted, and in spite of all the warnings I had heard from Colonel Howard and my double, Alfons, entered the game on my own account and increased the chaos.

"I'll help you. When you told me that you could not correctly locate the unifying word in your story, the nucleus, I suddenly thought that you were really suffering from delusions. But you told me that only to confuse me. Some experienced person advised you what to say to me. I will repeat, with emphasis: I believe that what you have told me is really the core of your problem. Only it's not your story, the problem does not go as deep as that with you. You do not suffer from it, you merely see it. And anyone can see it, Churchill as well as Stalin. Then I remember your literary idea which you mentioned on the stairs the last time you visited me so unexpectedly. Do you remember? That telegram, with the nonsense about the lost binocular adjustment." I hit home with that one.

Kaminsky began to breathe sharply, as though he were out of breath or his digestion had stopped, and he continually licked his dry lips. And I had the pleasant feeling that through him I was avenging everything that had hurt me so in the past, and that revenge was the only source of intense satisfaction left to me.

"What sort of nonsense is this?" this courteous man burst out rudely. "What do you take me for?"

"You could be a very fine spy, Mr. Kaminsky."

At that moment he looked into my eyes without flinching. But he was suffering like an animal, for he clenched his fists with all his strength and bit his lip. Finally he

turned away, wiped his moist forehead with the back of his hand, and asked in the small voice of a child who has been accosted by a thief, "In that case . . . who are you?"

"Sit down, Mr. Kaminsky, and relax. You're not in any danger from me. I'm not going to burn your finger-nails and I won't even ask who tortured you so recently, or why. Now everything is clear between us, and we can speak from the heart about fundamental things, if you want to. Who am I? I don't know, although I don't use a false name and although I am the possessor of a genuine doctor's certificate. I can only tell you who I am not. I am not a spy. I have not been given the job of pursuing anyone or anything."

Kaminsky sat down, but he remained tense all over, so that he could jump up if necessary. He mumbled, "You're an extremely dangerous person!"

"Why?"

"You may be crazy yourself! Why, you know the password, you've been briefed, and still you do and say whatever comes into your head!"

"I don't know what the password means and I'm not interested. Do you look at me as though I were mad only because I take your *why?* seriously? *Why* don't you, for example, Mr. Kaminsky, rise against these things which you imagine to be inevitable, and which you say brought you here? Is it too late? Are we allowed only to observe truth, and nothing more?"

I had the impression that he was not listening, that he was only turning over a single fixed idea which he could not utter. Finally he was able to stammer in a whisper, "Whom are you really working for?"

"Can't you see, can't you understand, for God's sake, that I'm not working for anybody?"

"You're not working alone . . . that's not possible!"

"I'm not the person you're looking for. All I know is merely that I am surrounded by people like you, people who want to tell me the truth about themselves, but who can't, because their job, which is to seek, is the only reason for everything they do. I don't want to know whom you're looking for; I ask *why* you're looking for him. I'm crying out your *why*?, Mr. Kaminsky. Are you deaf? Or are you too frightened? *Why* are you dancing this czardas, and *why* do you want me to dance it with you, when you know that it is the dance of madness?"

"I don't know what to do now," he babbled, as though he were in a trance. "I can't report this, they would never believe me. You . . . you've ruined me!"

I could feel the blood pounding in my veins.

"You're ruining yourself! Leave this business, go away, run away from them, if you can't turn against them!"

"I have nowhere to go, they are everywhere! And how can you be interested in what becomes of me if you are not working for anyone?"

"I have a deep interest, while yours is only superficial. I am not a messenger of madness, but I am surrounded by just such messengers. I have allowed myself to become surrounded by them only in order to open the eyes of my false patients, so that they can proclaim decency, so that this universal terror in the name of defence which means self-destruction, in the name of safety which is the supreme danger, in the name of perverted ideals and incantations—so that this terror may begin to collapse."

Kaminsky stood up. He pointed his burned forefinger at me and announced menacingly, "You are really insane, unless you're playing a game. You are a megalomaniac. Why, you declare anarchy, and you want to eliminate State power and deprive people of all their dreams of political rights, truth, and justice! A man has to have

dreams like that, otherwise he is paralysed. Why, you stand alone against people, like God!"

"Like God?"

"Don't try to trick me with words. I don't believe in God anyway."

"Mr. Kaminsky, where did you find the idea and the courage that time in the German train to ask WHY? of a person like those whom you serve today?"

He smiled sadly.

"If I knew, I might have forgotten about the whole affair long ago, and I would never have met you. If I knew, my life would probably be quite different today."

"In that case everything need not be lost!"

"It is. I have to go now. Good-bye, Doctor. We two were never meant to meet. I hope we shall never see each other again."

I gave him my hand, but he did not take it. He turned and walked slowly out of the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HELEN'S apartment had been cleaned up, and she was waiting for me in a new green dress which I would call a street dress if I understood women's fashions. The bare cleanliness of the room, Helen's clothes, the careful way in which she had fixed her hair and put on powder and rouge, her high heels, and a sort of affected languor in her walk, her gestures, and her speech all pointed to a change in her way of life, or an important event, which she would hesitantly try to tell me about. I was not very curious, only annoyed. Beating about the bush always bored me.

"I have the impression, Helen, that you have something important on your mind."

"And I have the same feeling about you, Arnost."

My annoyance and boredom were joined by anger.

"Then I'll help you! Examining your behaviour soberly, I get the impression that you have waited long and patiently for the moment when I would ask you to marry me, only so that you could say, 'My dear Arnost, you've been a bit too certain of me. I don't know now whether I should marry you or not.'"

She answered sourly, and with pride in her voice.

"Your understanding of the human mind is truly remarkable! It's too bad that I was not your patient; you might have given some thought a little earlier to what was going on in my mind. Unfortunately, I'm only your mistress!"

When she finished speaking, the heat of my anger was gone. I could see feelings and thoughts with dazzling clarity. I knew this condition, which I reached only rarely as the result of some unexpected insult. I was in an icy rage, soberer than I can ever remember being.

"Whatever you want, Helen. If you like that tone of voice and type of conversation, we can continue. Tell me everything, and don't hold yourself back. I shall only correct you on a few small points in which you may exaggerate. For example, you're not my mistress at all. You haven't been for a long time!"

"Because you haven't been a man for a long time," she blurted out, crying in her confusion.

"How did you find that out? Did you come to this conclusion by your remarkable experimental method, of greeting me every day in your underwear and leading me through a series of quarrels around the unmade bed? Now restrain yourself for a moment, don't say I'm a beast; I'm asking you for the last time to pull yourself together and consider where your hysteria is taking you. If we have to

stop seeing each other, let's do so as friends. Particularly since I haven't the least idea why we should break up. Helen, I've never concealed the danger which lies in the great difference in our ages. This danger, which you did not want to consider at the beginning, but which I have never ceased to think about, has kept me from getting hurt. I have been fully conscious all along that I might lose you at any time. Well, that moment has come; I shan't complain, I'll survive it. But please don't add insults and accusations which I don't deserve. I didn't want to hurt you and I haven't, and I never dreamed that your entire relationship with me would be reduced to vengeful waiting. Looking for a moment when you could tell me to go to hell and satisfy your pride. I swear I don't see why we should stop seeing each other; I don't understand you. But I implore you to think back a little and also remember the pleasant moments we have had together, and in those moments don't force me into the rôle of a butcher, or yourself into that of a slattern!"

She began to cry audibly. "Why, I don't want to stop seeing you, silly boy!"

Her tears did not impress me.

"Helen, we've gone too far, and a single kind word won't make everything all right again. Your silly boy hasn't been silly with you; now tell me what happened, why you wanted to find out from my mother why I was divorced, why you didn't come to me, why you have to sneak behind my back."

She stopped crying, and looked at me through a veil of tears so despairingly and so sorrowfully that I thought I must have turned into some sort of repulsive insect before her eyes. A vague suspicion flashed through my head.

"Has someone told you something nasty about me?"

"No, nothing nasty," she protested energetically. "But I'm afraid!"

"Now tell me the truth, Helen! Whatever my faults, they aren't so bad that you can't talk to me frankly!"

"You can't talk frankly yourself," she cried. "Arnost, you're so absorbed in yourself, and so sure of yourself, that you don't even realise what you tell me. I can't believe you any more. You drink; your mother has noticed it too. First you close your office because you're not feeling well and you don't have any patients, and then suddenly you open it again and you have patients. And you want me to believe that one of your patients comes to your apartment at night and that he gave you an advance of two thousand dollars. Who are you trying to fool? You never used to tell me much about yourself, and you never lied to me until lately. That's why I said you're not a man. I despise liars!"

She did not go on speaking, and, thanks to my sober, chill fury, I had my defence prepared.

"That's not all there is to it, Helen. Why don't you tell the whole truth if you hate liars so? True, you were a little incredulous when I told you about my evening patient and showed you the advance he gave me for his treatment. But someone has contributed to your doubts. Who was it? My mother? I doubt it. I'm prepared to do something which I also despise, but which I must try since you're so convinced I'm not telling the truth. The next time my patient comes to see me I'll dial your number without his seeing me. When you answer I won't say anything, so as not to alarm my patient, but you will know that it is I. Then you come over to my apartment and listen at the door for a while. I'll leave the hall door open a little on purpose, so that you can hear for yourself that I have a man in my apartment who is suffering from

anxieties and insomnia, and not some gangster, or whatever you think it is."

"But, Arnost, I don't want to spy on you!"

I made such an insane proposal only because I was entirely certain in advance that Helen would refuse. I said in an annoyed tone, "Then how am I to convince you? Of course there are lots of things about my midnight patient and my daytime patients in the office which I could talk to you about. But why should I talk about them? No doctor with the least bit of decency would do that! I wish I knew what makes you think things like this—or rather who!"

"Well, I'll tell you," she said with grave decision, and stood up ceremoniously. "I'll tell you, although I promised I wouldn't for the time being. About an hour after you left here the last time, I had a visitor. So the next day I went to see your mother before going to the office. And then when you called me, I felt as though I were dreaming. The person who visited me was your wife, Arnost!"

My shock was so great, and so physically painful, that it was as though I had never been startled before in my life. I looked at Helen, and it was only in her eyes and her whole expression, where sympathy and anxiety were mixed, that I could read how stunned I appeared.

"Arnost, for goodness' sake, say something! Don't look at me that way!"

My lips moved but no words came out. I had a single desire, to be out of there, away, to get drunk, not to have to think or speak. But there was no escape.

"What did she want?" I asked as though I were drugged.

"I don't really know," Helen blurted out; she was apparently sorry she had spoken. "Arnost, she didn't say one word against you. If I had known you were going to act this way . . ."

I stood up and looked about for a heavy object. I snatched a metal ash-tray from the table and crushed it until my fingers hurt. That helped. And the fact that Helen backed away from me restored a bit of my composure. I put the ash-tray back and sat down.

"I'll go over and talk to her," I muttered through my teeth, and added, "The bitch!"

And then, as had happened numerous times recently, when Helen saw that my anger had made me unreasonable she was frightened, and immediately sought a way to conciliate me. More than that, she began soberly and wisely to analyse the events which a few minutes before had ridiculously culminated in an outbreak of temper.

"Look, Arnost, nothing really happened. You mustn't fly off the handle so easily!"

This time her tactics irritated me especially.

"Now all of a sudden nothing has happened!"

"If you could only put yourself in my place for a moment you could understand me, and you wouldn't take everything as a major tragedy. It's not my fault that all of you Europeans have brought a piece of your dark past to America, complete with a ghost."

"Helen, I beg you, don't lecture me! I have no dark past which makes a sharp distinction between us Europeans and you Americans. I left a bad and dangerous woman in Europe, that's all, and now she is in America and wants to poison my life a second time. What did she want?"

"If I weren't afraid that you'd get mad again I'd tell you that she didn't impress me as a demon who wanted to destroy you. Quite the opposite. She told me that she had heard about me from your mother and that your mother had also told her that . . . you're somehow not yourself lately. She would like to see you, but she doesn't

dare look you up herself. She said she had hurt you terribly once, and that she had spent all these years thinking how to make it up to you. She is afraid you might suffer once more for what she has on her conscience. That is the main reason she wants to talk to you. Of course I wanted to ask her a lot of questions, but I couldn't think of anything to ask till an hour after she had left. It makes me uneasy. There were two things she mentioned which we have to discuss sooner or later, Arnost. I gathered from what she said that at some time she drew you into a kind of gang, and that this group is still operating. I could be wrong, but you can certainly understand that this is enough to keep me awake nights. And I'd like to be sure of one more thing. You've told me that you were married and divorced, but that's all. Judging from the way she spoke, you were extremely happy during the short time you were married. And now all I have to do is mention the name Elsa—that's her name, isn't it?—and you have a fit. Arnost, a person doesn't react that way to a past which is really dead! I couldn't marry you if I thought it was going to hang over us this way. And if I was upset today, it was because you never prepared me for the complications which your past could cause in our present life."

"I'm terribly sorry that someone caused you all this worry and doubt. But, Helen, I can't and won't talk to you about Elsa. Even you have your past which I've never asked you about and which you've never spoken of. But I can tell you that if one of your former lovers—I don't know whether you've had one or many—looked me up and started to tell me about you, I'd throw him out and I wouldn't tell you a word about it. I'm not the one who wants to bring up the past, it's Elsa. I certainly will go to see her and talk to her, and make her pack up and leave

New York the same day. All I can tell you is that she once deceived me, in the name of political ideals. For me she's dead, but frauds and crimes of that kind still exist. There are more of them all the time, in fact. It's not she who enrages me, it's the type of deceit she practised, the kind I have to deal with all the time as a doctor. Don't ask me any more. I feel ashamed to have to assure you that I'm not a fugitive from the law. We should trust each other at least that much! I can't tell either you or my mother any more about my unsuccessful marriage. Not because I have a bad conscience, but because it is too painful. Do you know Elsa's address? And is my explanation satisfactory?"

Helen looked very pensive. I had to repeat my last two questions. She came to with a start and said weakly and absent-mindedly, "I don't know her address, but your mother will certainly have it. Arnost, either I am awfully stupid, or you don't have a clear conscience. I couldn't trust you that completely if my life depended on it. It's not shame that keeps you from telling me about Elsa. But don't get excited again! Give me time. I promise you I won't cause a scene ever again. Forgive me for today. It will be the last time."

"Fine, Helen. You think it all over. You can't force faith in people!"

She looked at me as though from a great distance, and said sorrowfully, "No, you certainly can't force it! And that's why I'm so sure that in the future I'll never punish you with a scene, whatever becomes of the two of us."

I would have bet all I had that Alfons would come that night. I waited for him till dawn, but he never showed up. The next day I was in an evil humour and knew that I would be unable to do anything, or to come to any con-

clusion, if I did not talk with Alfons. Fate and the espionage service were kind and sent me neither new nor old spies that day. I had decided not to admit them, anyway. Once an unknown masculine voice phoned me at the office, but we were cut off as soon as I mentioned my name.

I ate little, but I drank a great deal and smoked still more. I took home a new bottle of Scotch for Alfons and myself. And I bought a bottle of champagne, in case there should be anything to celebrate.

It began to rain at eight o'clock in the evening; it brought no relief, however, but merely doubled the heat. I sat at the table stripped to the waist, sweated and drank, smoked and waited. About ten I could hear someone walking down the corridor outside my door. I got up to go quietly to the door, but I could see that I was staggering. I collided with a floor-lamp, which clattered, and when I opened my door I could hear only the sound of feet running lightly downstairs. I realised that my apartment was being watched, and I was surprised that I had not thought of it sooner. The stairway was dark, illuminated only by a bulb which glowed as through a fog. I could hear two men's voices on the floor below; a baby was crying on the ground floor; and that was all. I descended the stairs and went as far as the janitor's door, but I met no one, and the men whom I had overheard a moment before had either left the building or stepped into one of the apartments. Outside, in both directions the sidewalk flowed with people, exhausted by the heat, moving as though in a slow-motion film. A woman wearing an excessively broad hat looked at me in astonishment and stopped. She stared at my shoulders as though she had found something remarkable to look at. I felt my shoulder involuntarily and found that I was standing on the side-

walk half undressed. I was astounded. Not because of what the people walking by would think, seeing me standing on the street without my shirt and undershirt, but because I suspected I was as drunk as a lord. I ran back upstairs, taking two steps at a time. Although my thoughts came clearly, I quickly made some coffee, gulped it down black, and removed the whisky and cigarettes from the table. Then I decided to take a nap to sober up. I fell asleep immediately and dreamed about Alfons. He was in my apartment rummaging through all my drawers. Then he looked on the shelf for a book. Finally he looked through the pockets of my coat, which was thrown over a chair. "What are you looking for, Alfons?" I asked with difficulty, because my throat was dry. And he answered brusquely, without looking at me, "The binocular adjustment." I laughed, but Alfons barked at me, "Be quiet, you old fool!" It made me want to cry. Then he disappeared. I wanted to watch him as he went, but I could not move. And my throat was so dry that I could not speak a word. I woke up. Alfons was sitting at the table, smoking my cigarettes and drinking my whisky.

"Good evening, Alfons. Have you been here long?"

"About twenty minutes. How did you sleep, Doctor?"

"More important, how have you slept the past two nights?"

Alfons's voice was now tinged with happy animation. "You won't believe it, but I've slept marvellously. The first night I took the pills, and the second night I slept just as well without the pills. I can't understand it!"

I walked over and sat down by him.

"Sometimes all you have to do is break the cycle of sleepless nights. If you think, 'Yesterday I slept well, therefore nothing will happen if I don't sleep tonight,' it is often more effective than sleeping pills. And then, too, our last

conversation was not necessarily without value. The knowledge that there exists someone who wants to help, and will help if things go badly, is worth something, Alfons, even if you still won't believe it."

"I don't refuse to believe it any more," Alfons said cheerfully.

"If that's the case, I'm afraid you won't need me very much longer."

"We'll see. May I pour you a drink?"

"I've already had a good deal to drink today," I said, "but I'll be glad to drink some more with you. I think that without alcohol I would not be able to fulfil the task which I've laid out for myself."

"The question is, are you fulfilling it correctly?"

"Not the least bit correctly! The value of alcohol is that it gives me courage to disobey and to introduce my own plan. Does that surprise you?"

"No, it doesn't surprise me; I'm completely indifferent, so long as I can sleep. Of course I am dependent on you, and for that reason alone I'm a bit curious to what extent you are endangering our pleasant chats. What do you have in mind, actually? The last time you only hinted at it. Tell me in detail, Doctor."

"I'll be glad to, because if I go through it again out loud I'll be able to clarify a few things to myself. I was attracted to this remarkable undertaking at the beginning for two reasons. One reason was quite specific, and the other not at all obvious. Now I'm following only that second purpose."

"The first was money, wasn't it? The second, as I remember, was your desire for revenge. You wanted to become a conspirator, in order to destroy all other conspirators, is that right? And I told you, Doctor, that your idea was pure nonsense."

"It isn't! My plan is already beginning to show success."

"What on earth are you up to, and what are you planning to do?"

"All of those agents who come to my office shall have their eyes opened wide. They have worked out an admirable method for approaching me: they don't lie, they tell me the truth about what torments them. The only thing they keep to themselves—and that isn't hard to discern—is that they are in the service of their tormentors. They would be very happy if someone would mutiny for them against their masters and the service. And I shall make them see that there is no help for them unless they revolt, themselves. For example, I have brought one Soviet spy, a man named Kaminsky, to this point. He——"

Alfons interrupted me irritably. "Doctor, don't be annoyed when I tell you that precisely because you have aroused my sympathies it pains me to hear you prattle so naively. You are a complete dilettante and you strut as though you were a superman. Don't call someone a Soviet spy or an American spy. You can't tell the difference, not even under a microscope. Why are you doing all this, what do you expect to gain by it? Are you at heart the sort of man who prays for a world war only because he himself does not know what to do? I have a bit more experience than you, old man, and I don't know what to do either. For that reason I can tell you that your programme of inciting a few miserable paid agents to mutiny is childish and futile, like trying to drink the sea dry. You can't hope to do anything."

"Perhaps, but I can't stop now. I'm driven by a force that's greater than I am. I'm a monkey-wrench in their machinery. They've overlooked me, and I can cause a hell of a lot of damage!"

Alfons thought a while and then asked, "Did it annoy

you that much when I told you that in my opinion you would never see the rest of your money?"

"Not at all, Alfons. I realise now that I was interested in that money primarily so that I could get the better of them. I cannot breathe freely as long as their breath is in the air. I can't speak while they prostitute words. I am unable to walk erect as long as they force us to keep always in motion."

"For God's sake, Doctor, who are *they*? Not the directors of the espionage centres? An ordinary American citizen, not very different from you, could not conceive of this. He would never believe you if you tried to convince him how many large and small things the secret services have on their consciences. But even though we two know a bit more than the ordinary person about the power and ramifications of these services, we still can't say that the entire world revolves about them."

"I've already told you, Alfons, what I call a conspiracy: the present mode of thinking. I have spent the last twenty years adjusting to this type of thinking, thinking deformed by politics. I can't do it any more. Before I die I'm going to think and speak as I please."

"Look here, friend, you're not going to die just now! I'm beginning to understand what you're talking about. That as a result of the increased forced participation of people in so-called public life, which is being organised as an end in itself, without wisdom, morals, or faith, we speak in slogans instead of ideas, and commit treachery instead of acts. And that the exponents of State power have elevated slogans to the level of ideas and promoted guile to deeds. Perhaps we still think now and then in ideas, but talk in slogans. Perhaps we plan acts, but carry them out treacherously. And now I ask you: What else do you expect? Why this tempest in a teacup? Take the news-

papers. They are more powerful than the voice of Dr. Arnost Malik. You'll find a story about a barber in Brooklyn who was extremely well off and very religious and read the Bible every day. He was not only wealthy and God-fearing; he was right. He thought and spoke in ideas. And so the day before a national holiday he took a large quantity of cash out of the bank, and the next day went to the poorest part of Brooklyn and began to hand out money to badly dressed children. Inside of twenty minutes an ambulance had come for him. On other occasions you can't get an ambulance round there in less than a couple of hours. So they took the barber to an insane asylum. He is still there, but they say he will be released soon, because your colleagues consider it only a harmless religious fantasy. If you have time you might go to see the barber's priest, who helped our God-fearing friend to understand the word of God. He will surely tell you, 'He was a very good man, but I'm afraid he was just a little crazy!' And when they let this fellow out you can see whether he will try again to think in ideas and act in deeds. If so, he will stay behind bars the rest of his life. *C'est la vie, q'est-ce que vous voulez?"*

"Well, Alfons, you can keep telling yourself that nothing can be done, until finally you don't try to do anything. Or even make decisions. Even you, after all, were prepared to mutiny when you tried to get sleeping pills out of me. I hope——"

Alfons interrupted me. The subject I had embarked upon was not to his liking. Impatiently he said, "Wait!" but his forehead wrinkled immediately, as though he had forgotten what he was going to say. He finished his drink, poured himself another, and poured some for me.

"Oh yes, I know what I was going to ask. What did the espionage service do to you years ago which was so

terrible that you haven't forgotten it yet? You wanted to tell me about it."

"That's funny, I don't want to talk about it any more. I don't even know why. It's the sort of thing I know about all the time, even though I don't think about it."

"Well, tell me about it! Don't keep me in suspense! You can be brief."

"Your sudden interest surprises me, Alfons."

"Me, too, if you want to know," he answered readily.

"Well, I really will be brief about it. At the end of 1932 I studied in London and there I met three people who were inseparable friends. They were Konrad, Helmuth, and Elsa, German medical students. Both of the fellows were more interested in politics than in science and made little effort to conceal the fact that they were Nazis. I wasn't the least bit interested in politics, and they did not force their opinions on me. I liked them because in calm moments, when one is over thirty, one is prepared to believe in friendship with a capital F, and these two Germans were exponents of the cult of loyal friendship and ceremonious companionship. I was interested in them primarily, however, because of Elsa, with whom I was in love. And Konrad and Helmuth were as happy in our love as if she were their own sister and they had devoted their lives to her. Elsa was nine years younger. She was delicate, as though she had grown up among flowers and been trained by nuns. Her strength lay in her moderation, and her attraction in her wisdom and humility. She was unusually wise for her age. What shall I tell you? We were married after a very short while and our witnesses were of course Konrad and Helmuth. We spent our honeymoon in Czechoslovakia. I was in seventh heaven. Everything I touched turned to success, and the feeling of married bliss grew to intoxication. The fact that my

mother liked Elsa very much, and the feeling that I had to guard her and protect her in the chauvinistic atmosphere of the time, only increased my blind devotion to her. Oh yes, I was really blind, and I overlooked a number of things. Such as the fact that Elsa did not correspond with her relatives, whom she mentioned sparingly and without pleasure. And the fact that our witnesses in London did not answer my letters and that my wife never spoke of them. And even the fact that, when I was out, strange people often came to the house, and that she told me only that they were former student friends who had come to Prague for a few hours as tourists.

"Alfons, I don't know whether you are married, or whether you ever have been, but the atmosphere surrounding our relationship was not disturbed for a moment by everyday cares, by boredom or doubts, by any of the disturbing elements which sooner or later creep into the most ideal marriage. And all at once it came to an end. One day Konrad came to visit me at the hospital. It was soon after Hitler came to power in Germany. Konrad looked like a tramp and was just skin and bones. I scarcely recognised him. He asked me for money. He said he had fallen into disfavour and had to flee to Czechoslovakia to avoid arrest. I invited him to the house, but he refused. I urged him, saying that he would certainly want to see Elsa, and he was embarrassed and said nothing. I got him a room in the best hotel in Prague, I got him police permission to stay in the city, I bought him clothes, and at these signs of friendship he finally broke down and told me something which burned itself into my mind and which I won't forget till I die. He, Helmuth, and Elsa had for many years been members of a high echelon of the Hitler student youth movement. Each of them had a different mission. Elsa's task was to marry a Czechoslovak no later than the

end of 1933, and organise extensive espionage among the Sudeten Germans. According to Konrad, my wife—my sweet, delicate, innocent Elsa—was one of the cleverest and most dangerous women in the German secret police. Our marriage came about on direct orders from the Gestapo.

“When I went home that day my mind was filled with murder and suicide, and Elsa immediately read in my face what had happened. I expected her to deny it, but she denied nothing. She kept repeating that she had not actually deceived me, because from the first moment she had liked me, and that the order to marry me was in accord with her most fervent desire. And she went on to say that since coming to Czechoslovakia she had been sabotaging her mission and trying in every possible way to break out of the web in which she had been caught so many years ago for foolish and romantic reasons. Well, that was the end. That very night I called my lawyer and asked him to start my divorce, that the blame would be mine, and that he should not try to find out the real cause. Then, as I have told you, I tried unsuccessfully to hang myself. The next few years are hazy in my mind. I hated Naziism and its methods, but I was not enthusiastic about the hypocritical and ineffective efforts being made to fight it. I was nauseated when National Socialist fanaticism was mentioned, but I had the same reaction to empty chauvinism and the Communist Panslavism that began to thrive in the countries most threatened by Hitler. I sensed that war was coming and I could see that I had nothing to fight for. That was why I applied for an immigration visa to America. All those years while I waited feverishly to leave were years of purgatory on earth. They did not purge me, though, but only hardened me. That’s really the end of my story. Perhaps I ought to add that I learned recently that Elsa is in New York and

is trying to find me and ruin my life all over again."

As I was talking, Alfons sat completely motionless. He did not drink, he did not smoke, he scarcely breathed. I could not say whether he was listening to me so tensely, or whether his thoughts were miles away. At last I finished.

He sounded disappointed. "You must have loved her very much. And for that very reason I don't understand why you didn't forgive her. After all, you were completely non-political, and in London you didn't mind being close friends with Nazis. Is that the whole story?"

"No, it isn't," I said, surprised at his perceptiveness. "I would have forgiven her for murder, but they had taught her something which I still consider shameful. I felt it as a personal insult. I beat her terribly then . . . and when I think about it now, I would do so again . . . so that I might torture myself through her. It's odd. In doing what they did they took not only my wife, they took all women from me. . . . If they had castrated me it would have been less crude and disgusting. Since that time I've avoided all women. Not physically but mentally. My case is a perfect example of psychophysical parallelism. I can have women and still do, but I have the feeling that I am cohabiting with animals. And I like women about as well as we like animals."

"Did you find out later that Elsa was somehow perverted?" Alfons asked, as though he were becoming more and more bored. I found his lack of interest convenient. I was actually talking only to myself, anyway. After all these years I was again talking to myself about it.

"When Elsa admitted all these things I began to beat her; I beat her with everything I could lay my hands on. But before I hit her I had a thousand impulses to go to her in tears and forgive her. I wanted to run away with

her, to forget it all far from the world of madness in which we found ourselves. It was only by chance that I asked her what her relationship with Konrad and Helmuth had really been. And she told me that both had been her lovers, that it was quite in the spirit of the principles of the Hitler student youth movement, and that among those young people, whose only passion was for Greater Germany, jealousy was unknown. I would have forgiven her even that if . . . if I had not been certain . . . that I had married a virgin. I was astounded, and asked her why she was lying when I knew that she had had no lovers before me. And she answered calmly and sadly, 'They also taught us how to deceive our husbands on the wedding night!'

Alfons broke into convulsive laughter. And suddenly I remembered that I had laughed in that same violent, insane way when Elsa confessed to me, that I rocked back and forth and waved my arms in the air, just as Alfons was doing. I also began to laugh, not because I wanted to, but because I was infected by Alfons and by my memory. The entire apartment, the whole space around us was filled with our shrieking and shouting, which seemed never to end. "Stop, Alfons," I tried to say, but instead of words all that came from my throat was a neighing sound. Then I choked, lost my breath, turned grey, and almost lost consciousness. When I could again speak, I whispered, "Don't laugh any more, Alfons!"

And he answered, almost moved, "Why, you're the one who's been laughing, Doctor. Have a drink!"

I drank. We both drank, surrounded for a long while with the murmuring sounds of twilight and the haze of thoughts crumbling into ash.

Someone knocked loudly on the door. Before I could make a move, Alfons was in the corner of the room, half

crouching, with a revolver in each hand pointing at the door. He was the last person I expected to carry weapons in his pocket. "What shall I do?" I asked, cupping my hands around my mouth. "Ask who it is," he told me, in a new, commanding tone.

"Who is it?"

"Dr. Brownell. Could I come in for a moment, Dr. Malik?"

I looked inquiringly at Alfons, who nodded assent. He wanted to say something more, however, so I called out "You'll have to wait a moment."

I had no time to tiptoe over to Alfons and discuss with him in a whisper what to do. Through the door I could hear the bustle of feet, several muffled blows, a long groan, and the fall of a body. Then people talking quietly and quickly, and then the slow, heavy, unsteady sound of many pairs of feet leaving the building. And finally from somewhere at the very bottom of the stairway a woman screamed. A frightening scream. I ran to the door but Alfons, putting his revolver away carelessly in his trouser pockets, stopped me.

"You won't find anything interesting out there. But if you're bound and determined to go out, you'd better put on a shirt."

I tried to comply, but the shirt and my wet body conspired against haste. It took an eternity to dress, and I pulled off at least two buttons in the process. That scream still haunted me. I was afraid to think about it.

The stairway had come alive. Sleepy people in pyjamas were coming out of their apartments and talking in agitated little groups.

"What happened?"

"Oh, they caught a thief."

"Who caught him?"

"Some detectives. They took him out like a sack of flour."

There were other people walking about in the hallway who had not just got out of bed, judging from their clothes. And there were two policemen. They stood with their hands in their pockets looking at the excited swarm and smiled coldly.

"Where did you catch him? What floor was he on?" I asked one of them. He gave me a superior, unpleasant look, as though I had no right to ask, and I became furious. "Have you orders not to say anything? Aren't we supposed to know what happened?"

He shrugged his shoulders, turned away, and mumbled: "Get out of here. You are in the way."

But I did not move. This arrogant American policeman, who had just strutted off, *spoke with a foreign accent*. I thought I must be delirious from drinking too much, and hurried back to Alfons. In front of my apartment I stumbled and caught the edge of the door. My left hand touched something slippery and sticky. In disgust I closed my fist and staggered into the room holding my hand well out from my body; my fingers were covered with blood. I ran to the basin and scrubbed my hand with a brush.

Behind my back Alfons said jokingly, "You're a fine doctor if you can't stand the sight of blood!"

"Alfons, pour me some whisky, quick! Did you hear that scream?"

"I didn't hear any scream. It was all in a day's work. The Pig, or Doctor Brownell, won't bother you any more. Doctor, what's in that fat bottle in the refrigerator?"

"Champagne. I bought it in case—ha ha ha!—in case we had something to celebrate together."

"Well, don't smile as though you had swallowed vinegar. We have plenty to celebrate! The Pig—Brownell—is out

of the way, I am beginning to sleep without pills, you've got that business off your chest. What more do you want? If it's all right with you, I'll open the champagne."

"Do whatever you want, Alfons. You said we are being watched by about fifty men. Where are they?"

"Everywhere. On the sidewalk. Probably even on the roof. They come into the house in various disguises and some of them may even have moved in. What do you want to know?"

"What would these people do if by chance, by the purest chance, a real friend of mine came to see me at night?"

"Nothing. They know all your friends and relatives perfectly."

"That makes me feel a little better! Hell, who's ringing up at this hour of the night?"

I picked up the telephone and cried angrily, "Hello, who is it?"

There was a moment of silence. Then an icy voice which I did not recognise: "Arnost, I'm calling from a phone booth, and I'll be home in fifteen minutes. If you want to see me for the last time for a moment, come right away!"

"What? Where am I to come? Who is this, anyway?"

"You're drunk again, but come anyway. This is Helen!"

CHAPTER NINE

SINCE I could not get a taxi immediately I decided to take the subway to Helen's apartment. It was a poor decision, because I waited more than twenty minutes for a train, while every scrap of my clothing became soaked with perspiration in that torrid, mouldy cave. I gasped for air and played with an elusive idea. I did not know what had happened, but I had the feeling that Helen was at my

house when Doctor Brownell was beaten or killed at my door. That female scream which I had heard and which seemed to tear space apart could have been hers.

The oppressive heat and the closeness of the air added to the effect of the alcohol. My stomach felt upset and my head spun, as though I were sitting on a merry-go-round, and my thoughts were mixed up so that I could not recognise one of them. Otherwise I was indifferent even to the fact that I would soon have to talk with Helen, who would draw herself back from me as soon as she smelled sweat and whisky, I asked myself, So what? But that did not help. It did not bother me that we were through (I was now sure of that), but I was disturbed picturing the end, when everything that I might do or say would be disgusting, because I stank like a pile of old, dirty rags.

But Helen did not shrink from me. She even smiled. It was a peculiar, embarrassed smile, the sort of smile which comes involuntarily to one's lips when one catches someone one knows in an extremely delicate situation, and when the other clearly knows that he has been caught.

"Sit down, I'll make you some coffee."

"Don't make anything, please. Sit down yourself and tell me what's on your mind."

"Arnost, I have to make you some coffee. You're so drunk—now, I'm not scolding you—that you won't understand without some black coffee in you."

"I am in complete control of myself. Now leave me alone and stop your not-scolding me for every drop of alcohol I drink! What have I done this time?"

"You haven't done anything to me, not today. You know, I've really been expecting it a long time."

"For Christ's sake, skip the introduction and tell me what you're talking about."

"If you weren't so drunk . . ."

"Helen, if you say once again that I'm drunk I won't be responsible for what I do!"

Immediately the embarrassed smile vanished and her eyes sparkled with hatred. Not disgust or revulsion, just hatred.

"Have you ever been responsible for what you did? My only desire is to get into the tub and scrub myself for hours until I bleed, I feel so filthy. But I promised you I wouldn't make a scene! The first thing tomorrow I'm leaving New York. I'm going a thousand miles away, and I only pray the police won't remember me when they start investigating your ways of curing patients."

"So you've been spying on me!"

"I never even dreamed of it. I decided to go to your apartment and ask your midnight patient directly whether it's true that he gave you so much money and why. On the stairway I met some very odd people. They gawked at me as though I belonged in another kind of house. I debated for a moment whether to knock or ring, and you heard me. But you were so drunk that you stumbled before you got to the door. I ran away. Then I saw you go out on to the sidewalk without your shoes or shirt. I looked at you and said to myself, 'And that's the man I'm supposed to marry!' I went home, but I couldn't sleep, I couldn't even think straight. So I decided to go to your place again. When I got up to the third floor I heard someone on the floor above banging on your door. I stopped. The man said he was a Doctor Brownell, and you knew him, because you answered him and told him to wait a moment and that you would let him in. There was nothing for me to do but leave again, but I had hardly gotten a few steps down when a crowd appeared from nowhere and the police rushed up to your door and beat up your friend, your guest! I screamed, but one of the plain-clothes men calmed

me down—hah!—he calmed me down by telling me that I shouldn't worry, that they had just caught a dangerous gangster. The fact that you're still free means that the police do not yet know or want to know about your relationship to the gangster. Arnost, you would be doing me a great favour if you didn't deny any of this or even try to explain it. You have nothing to fear. Even if they force me to testify against you, I won't. I'm even losing my hatred for you—my only regret is for the three years I've lost. And I'll never, never forgive myself for being so blind. Now leave!"

She said it in such a commanding tone that I automatically arose.

"Helen . . ."

"If you're foolish enough to think you can help matters with a few final words, well, help yourself! Just don't make it too long."

"I want to say only one thing: You are right that I have committed a crime against you, but I am not a criminal as you think. On the contrary my participation in the scene which you witnessed and which you do not understand is under the protection of the highest authorities of our civilisation and of the law. My crime against you lies in the fact that I have concealed from you something completely different. I should have told you long ago that as a result of the great times we are living in and the great discoveries civilisation is making, and as a result of my own over-anxious respect for the law and for civil duties, I ceased to see human beings in people. Until today I have not consciously committed a single act which was not in harmony with the official interpretation of the laws, either in Europe or in America. I have been law-abiding to a fault. I shan't be any longer, so now perhaps I shall again see human beings."

"That sounds pretty," she said, almost smothering in her attempt to suppress more poisonous sarcasm. "And what kind of animal did you see in me as a result of your perfect civil obedience?"

"A cat, a yearning, pampered cat whom it was fun to play with even though, or because, she scratched."

"Get out of here! I don't want to listen to you any longer!"

She threw herself on the couch and cried convulsively. She choked as she swallowed tears. I looked at her without sorrow or anger and wished I could see her in the same position nude for a few moments. Just once more. I had no other wish and so I had nothing to say. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck three. I went out quietly. And when I heard Helen crying hysterically and calling me back, I began to walk faster.

As I remember, the next day was Saturday and my office hours were from eleven to one. Precisely at eleven an unshaven, dirty workman showed up in old clothes, saying that he had been sent to fix the telephone. But there was nothing wrong with the telephone. And when I asked him if perhaps the people who were tapping my phone were having trouble understanding me, he answered, as though my question were completely natural, that it was quite possible, but in that case they should have sent a man named Horn and not himself, and that was just the way things were, they had been completely screwed up for some time now. He was extremely vulgar, but only in his words, not his tone, which was pleasant and sympathetic, even respectful, contrasting oddly with the indecent expressions he used. I gave him two dollars for his unnecessary trip, and he thanked me enthusiastically, saying that he had not had a tip for a long time, because people were bastards

now and his work wasn't worth s-t. It occurred to me that even this agent, who was apparently on a very low level, said what he thought. I would have liked to talk with him longer because I enjoyed his spontaneous choice of words and because I did not want to leave my own half-world in which this filthy, vulgar man fitted so well. But he was in a hurry, even though, he said, he would like to p-s on the whole business. We shook hands cordially and he went, leaving me with nothing to do but seek contact with people outside of my own misty world. I rang up my mother.

"Hello, Arnost?"

"Mother, I want to apologise . . ."

"Don't apologise! How are you?"

"Not too well. Mother, I'd like to see Elsa. Give me her address, will you?"

"You'll have to wait, she's moving just now."

"Out of New York?"

"No, she's coming to live with me. I can't stay alone any more. Now don't scold me!"

"Why should I scold you? It's not you but I who am quite powerless. And it's not I but you who do what comes into your head. Mother, I'll have to stop, I have a patient. When can I see Elsa at your place?"

"Just after the week-end. But phone before you come and I'll leave you two alone. Oh, I have something important to tell you. You left your coat and tie at my house. I cleaned the coat and pressed the tie."

"Thank you. I have something important to tell you, too. I've broken off with Helen. Or rather she broke off with me."

"I expected that. Would you like to come over to supper every evening now? Think it over, I'm not forcing you."

"Thank you, I'll think about it. So long now."

"Good-bye, Arnost."

It was actually much easier than I had expected. With a feeling of great relief I went to see my patient. It was Ruth Stein.

"Good gracious, are you still around, Miss Stein?"

"Thank you for asking, Doctor, but I think I'm a bit too much around. Do you think I've gained weight again?"

Everything about that smiling, happy woman was broad, from her hat and her dimpled face to her provocative bosom and her hips. I looked at her curiously, thinking how I could escape from her gentle simplicity, and trying to guess in advance how she would react when I told her directly and pleasantly that I knew what she was up to.

"Well, come on in, Miss Stein. Why didn't you come when you were supposed to, and why didn't you even ring me?"

"I couldn't, Doctor. I tell you, I've been running around so in the last few days I don't know whether I'm coming or going. Guess what, I have a new job! I get twice as much as in the old place."

"Well, I certainly congratulate you, but won't your former employers be annoyed that you have gone over to their competitors?"

"You know, I'm afraid of that too!" brightening at my show of interest, and crossing one plump leg over another, not forgetting to uncover her knees. Clever monster, I thought, it won't be as easy to deal with her as I expected. What to do next? The telephone saved me from this decision.

"Mr. Prengel. Well, well, good morning. Miss Stein has just come in. Do you remember her? You two always show up at the same time. Listen, Mr. Prengel: maybe my office looks like a railway station—it's hard to find a quiet office in New York if you aren't a millionaire. But I still

can't permit my patients to come wandering in whenever they decide they feel like it!"

Prenzel grunted a moment before he said in an irritated and insulted tone, "You should know me well enough to realise that if I don't let you know I'm not coming I have a good reason: I've had a nervous breakdown."

"You don't say! How come?"

"That Doctor Brownell I told you about has started to blackmail me."

"Well, look here, you can tell me all about that when you come, if you can, and care to."

"If I can and care to! I have to! Why do you avoid talking about it? I too know that they rubbed out Brownell yesterday!"

"Mr. Prenzel, I haven't time now," I said harshly, alarmed at his stubborn and inexplicable indiscretion. "When do you want to come?"

"Tomorrow at ten."

"Tomorrow is Sunday."

"You don't have anything else to do anyway."

"Mr. Prenzel, I won't see you at any time. Your behaviour has ceased to amuse me."

"If you refuse I'll complain!"

"To whom?"

"You know whom. I want you to——"

"One moment, Mr. Prenzel! What you want or don't want doesn't interest me. You are *asking* me to see you tomorrow at ten. Doesn't it bother you that Miss Stein is listening? If it doesn't matter, fine, come tomorrow. Good-bye."

I rang off.

"What is wrong with that unpleasant old man?" Miss Stein asked anxiously. "You know, Doctor, I'm terribly sensitive, it just breaks my heart when I see people being

mean to themselves and others. Why can't everybody like everybody else?"

"It doesn't work here, but they say it does happen somewhere in the next world."

"I'm perfectly satisfied with this world and I'm not particularly looking forward to the next one. You know, if it weren't for my weight and a few other little things nothing at all would bother me."

"I envy you, Miss Stein. But what about your kleptomania? Doesn't that bother you? By the way, you took my last bundle of file cards."

"Well, I warned you!" she defended herself coquettishly and exposed her knee still farther. "They were blank anyway."

"Miss Stein, I like the way you plunge *in medias res*. How would you like to tell me quite frankly what brings you here? You might as well, because I cannot cure your skill at taking things which do not belong to you."

"Doctor, I'll tell you everything, but not till lunch."

"What do you mean?"

"In a few minutes they're going to send over lunch and wine from a near-by French restaurant. I decided that I would celebrate my new job by having an intimate little lunch with you, so I ordered it here. You'll surely forgive me for surprising you, and won't spoil my pleasure. Doctor, sit down here next to me and don't stand around as though you were going to run away! Be a good fellow, Doctor, and forget your bashfulness! Take an example from me—I can tell you frankly that I don't find you hard to look at."

"Look here, Miss Stein," I began in some confusion. "Your frankness is gratifying, but take it easy, don't turn this into another game of hide-and-seek. What was your idea in our having lunch together? And how could you be so sure that I would not refuse? And——"

"Doctor, sit down next to me quickly! No, not on the chair; over here, on the couch! And don't be afraid, I only want to whisper something to you."

Still curious, and not knowing what to do, I stepped over to her hesitantly. She pressed herself against me with the salacious movements of a practised courtesan. With a languorous, stroking movement she pushed the hair off my forehead and whispered unctuously, "If you would treat me alone I could give you three times as much as they're giving you for him!" Then she pinched my ear-lobe and kissed my face noisily.

I stood up and stepped back. It was not easy, for my patient tried to prevent me with an immodest gesture.

"Wait, wait! I don't like to be kept in the dark. I'd like to have a few things cleared up first. What are you actually offering me? Lunch and yourself? Or money for some little service? What is the name of the firm which sends you to make such alluring offers? And how am I to cure you, and of what?"

"You're both inquisitive and reserved, Doctor. Sit down again."

"I'm not going to sit down. I'd like you to explain yourself. And get this straight, young lady. I'm terribly flattered that you don't find me hard to look at, but I can't return your unexpected interest so suddenly. I'm too old to fall in love at first sight. A mature man usually develops an affection after sober reflection. You must help me to make such sober consideration. Your new firm sent you to me. What do you do for them?"

"I draw. I told you I'm a commercial artist," she chirped, not the least bit dampened by my rejection of her advance.

"What sort of drawings do you do?"

"Semi-abstract. They're in demand now."

"Ah, do you draw instruments?"

"Do you mean lost binocular adjustments, chum?"

"That's precisely what I mean, chum!"

"Doctor, you're marvellous! I'd kiss you right now if you weren't so shy. Oh, what have we here! They've come from the restaurant—I told them to ring three times. We'll have our little lunch right here, how's that? Look, I'll clear this junk off the table, and you go tell them to bring it right in here."

"What are you going to steal while I'm gone?"

"Nothing! You've cured me, you rascal. At least for today!"

"One more question, my friend. Are you going to continue to amuse yourself by talking in symbols, or are you going to break down and talk plain English during lunch?"

"Don't be crude, Doctor. You know perfectly well that one always talks in symbols with a lady, even when discussing the most intimate things. I've already told you that I'm sensitive. Now get going, my shy, rough knight; I'm hungry. By the way, the lunch is all paid for, including the tip."

In the waiting-room two waiters in white uniforms were standing at attention in front of a cart covered with plates; bottles, glasses, and silverware. They flashed their teeth discreetly in greeting and then discreetly, without waiting for unnecessary orders, they pushed the cart through the doors of the office. They were obviously experienced, used to waiting on couples, wordlessly and on tiptoe, in the private rooms of night-clubs.

Miss Stein had not been idle. Those few moments had been sufficient for her to give my office the appearance of a room in a disreputable hotel. She had thrown everything off the table on to the floor, pulled the table over to the

couch, pulled down the shades, and lit a single feeble bulb in the floor-lamp. And that was not all. She had made herself comfortable. She had taken off her red jacket, under which she had a flowered blouse, cut so as to reveal a maximum and leave a minimum to the imagination. In some sort of sun-suit over which she drew her skirt, she ran about helping the waiters set the table. With all my experience, and in spite of the unexampled discretion of the two boys, who moved like thieves, I felt that my face was afire with shame.

The two waiters soon disappeared and Miss Stein locked the door after them. Hastily I lit the ceiling light and unlocked the door.

"What are you doing, Doctor? Don't you like intimate lighting?"

Blushing, I looked nervously at the depths of her décolletée, over which fluttered the good-natured smile of an epicure whose marvellous appetite is spoiled by nothing, and who is prepared to give herself away without reserve. It was not the cheap smile of an experienced prostitute which she bestowed on me, nor the professional pose of a street-walker enticing a chance client. It contained more; it contained infatuation. This was the blissful smile of a courtesan voluptuously baring her arms for her lover. I had begun to have enough.

"See here, my fine lady, you really have brought me to an embarrassing point. I'm prepared to eat and drink with you, and I'm willing to talk symbolically with you about commercial matters, but that is all. It is very important to me that this room remain an office in spite of the fact that you have taken off your red jacket and I my white coat."

"As you wish, Doctor," she answered without sarcasm, as though she was unable to deny me anything.

"And one more thing, Miss Stein. Drop the rôle of a seductress. I find it very unpleasant. We shall agree or disagree on the basis of what you have to tell me and not because you take off your clothes, turn out the light, and behave as though I were twenty years old. What are you looking at me like that for? For the last time I beg you to stop!"

She shook all over with emotion when she turned her gaze and her shamelessly pursed lips away from me. And then she said in the voice of a small girl when someone has interfered with her playing, "In you I see the prince in the fairy tale who could grant a girl three wishes."

She licked her lips and continued, blinking her eyes, "Only Ruth Stein has but one wish, which she would like fulfilled three times."

I smiled at this transparent joke, and then I was sorry that I had smiled.

"You are really a sensitive lady if you can easily be wounded by prosaic words! I see that they have brought us some sort of cocktail. Now you be the hostess for a while."

"Fine, I'll pour. Sit down—may I call you Arnost?"

"You may not! Miss Stein, I'm being quite serious. If you continue to talk in this way I won't touch your lunch and I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, please forgive me. Don't get mad, I'll be good!"

She sounded convincing and not at all lascivious. Perhaps she had decided she would get nowhere with me that way. I was somewhat pacified.

"To your health, Miss Stein!"

"To yours, Doctor. And now tell me what I can do for you. I'll tell you right away that I will do anything for you so long as you don't ask the impossible. My, isn't that

a good cocktail! Ah dear, the French really understand the good things in life."

"The cocktail is excellent, but I don't understand what you are talking about. You want me to do something for you and not the other way round."

"But, my dear friend, you're wrong. Ruth Stein is a good soul right down to the core. She's uncomplicated and simple, but she wasn't born yesterday. You would have thrown me out long ago if I were not of some use to you."

"You weren't born yesterday, that's certain! But you would be surprised if you could realise how little I want of you. Let's forget about it. There's no point in it and it's dangerous. I tell you honestly that I can't follow you, but your optimism and good humour, which are almost chronic, are genuine and are extremely rare in your profession. Don't ruin your life! You are still young. Leave this business, live in the world as you were meant to. The rôle of a spy doesn't become you."

"How you talk, Doctor! Don't be vulgar," she said indignantly, as though 'spy' were the most obscene word in the entire dictionary.

"Pardon me, I forgot I am supposed to speak in symbols. Then quit painting."

"You have odd wishes. Drawing is my passion, it's not just a job. But I would quit if you left psychiatry."

"I don't understand. You know, this business of symbols can lead to misunderstanding. I am more in favour of ideological symbols than verbal ones."

"Wait, I'll give you some chicken first. We must eat before it gets cold on us. Doctor, I have a lot of money now and if we come to an understanding we can both be rich. You of course will never have as much as I, and I would like you to be dependent on me. I would like to buy you for myself. Then we could go to Mexico and live together.

I know that you are single. You would treat me alone the whole time. It would not be disagreeable for you. I know how to make life pleasant for people. I need a man who is a doctor. Don't worry, I'm not offering to marry you. You'd be completely free. I know what I am saying and whom I'm saying it to. I've only made this offer to one other doctor; he was in San Francisco. The stupid fool refused because he liked some girl who finally gave him up anyway, and you can bet he's sorry now!"

She spoke gently and persuasively, all the while eating with extraordinary gusto and smacking her lips, as though she fancied such an odd combination of speaking and eating would increase my appetite. This agent exceeded all my experience, all my preconceptions, all conjecture.

"I still don't understand you."

She favoured me with an ardent smile of her full, sensual lips.

"I'm not speaking about business now, but about life, if you want to be more specific. I want to be your patient. I believe that you could cure me."

"Of what? Kleptomania?"

"Are you really that thick?"

"Yes, I certainly am."

She looked at me tenderly, turned her head slightly, and again pursed her lips obscenely.

"I want you to be my lover."

"Will you ever stop this stupid game? This is complete nonsense!"

"No, it isn't. My dear, from the first moment—"

"From the very first moment you've been in love with me, is that it?"

"No, I don't know what it means to be in love. But I could be eventually. It has to be a doctor. I lack something to make me completely happy. I have never yet

experienced it. I'm sure you know what I am talking about. They say it can be cured. Only I don't want just a doctor, I want a doctor-lover. One just like you. The one in San Francisco resembled you very closely. Now do you understand?"

"I understand, but I can't believe my ears. You want to keep me?"

"When a lot of money is involved they don't call it 'keeping'."

"Miss Stein, who are you really?"

For a moment she looked at me longingly, as though every feature of my face filled her with bliss, and then said simply and naturally, "Who am I? Who do you think? A whore!"

I stared at her in astonishment, completely disarmed by this woman for whom the term 'spy' was too crude.

"And you, my dear, are a charlatan," she continued. "Why not admit it? Maybe you were a good doctor once, I think you probably were. But because of your extravagant dreams you have turned your back on your profession. And what did you have to dream about? You can count the things on the fingers of one hand. And now the old charlatan meets an old whore who tells him: Look, buddy, you can have everything you've ever longed for, but you have to take me into the bargain. You can make me feel what I have never experienced before. I know you can, I can sense it just looking at you! And the more bashfully you behave the more you will arouse me and the more pleasure you will give me in the end."

I was at last able to find words. "Look, my philanthropic friend, I'm more confused by my behaviour, actual or imagined, which gave you the courage to speak as you did, than by the singular proposal you have made. Let us go through it again. You want to leave espionage——"

"Oh, stop it!"

"You want to leave painting, go to Mexico, and live in sin with me there. And you are prepared to give me quantities of money and provide an idyllic life for me. Both for treatment, if that's what you want to call it, and for betraying to you a small secret, the information you were trying to find when you took my file cards. Is that right?"

"The secret is unimportant."

"Do you really think so? If you mean it, give me a synonym for the phrase *the lost binocular adjustment*."

"Of course. Don't you know it yet? There are two versions. According to one it means *get him alive*, and according to the other it means *he is working for us*. Now, isn't that proof of the complete confidence I have in you?"

"I don't know. I'm just as ignorant as I was, unless you tell me more about these interpretations."

"I don't know any more, but you aren't really interested in that!"

"Quite true. Now all you want is for me to point out one of my patients to you, right? And such an experienced . . . artist . . . thinks that I would tell her everything because of her beautiful drawings and her eyes, assuming of course that I knew something?"

"Oh, my innocent," Ruth Stein said maternally. Then she continued to caress me with her voice. "You too are pretending to do semi-abstract drawings. Someone told you who *he* is. Now whom do you know so well that you are willing to stake your life on his reliability? Maybe it is I, maybe Mr. Prengel. Maybe it is that attractive young man who goes to drink with the brilliant doctor in his apartment at night. Perhaps I am supposed to learn who *he* is, but it is possible that I am to find out how much he talks when he makes his visits. Who knows? If my firm

thought for a moment that our blue-eyed friend really knew something they would surely take you and beat hell out of you till you told them what they wanted to know through your screams. Fortunately you don't know anything."

I sat down as though I had been struck on the head. Even the little bit I understood became unclear. She knew about Alfons! That corroborated what Colonel Howard told me. Why then had she taken the cards out of my file? Nothing made sense any more, nothing at all.

I looked at her anxiously and asked, "What do you really want of me?"

"I want you to leave all this and come with me. That's all."

"That means that you already know . . . you don't really need to know . . . Miss Stein, whom are you working for?"

"Whom am I drawing for? For my new firm. But in the future I want to draw for myself alone. After all, you persuaded me to do so yourself. I really want to run away, but with you, darling, tomorrow. Agreed? Shall we drink on it?"

"Be patient a while. I don't know. I have to think it all over."

"That's all right, I have plenty of time. I only hope our charlatan has as much time. But that's enough of business. Let's have some wine!"

And then it happened. First there were spots before my eyes, and everything seemed to dissolve in front of me. Then my ears began to ring so that I heard Ruth Stein's chattering as a sort of bubbling noise without words. I wanted to drink the wine quickly, but I kept hitting my nose with the glass, unable to find my own mouth. I suddenly realised what was happening. I wanted to say,

"I feel ill!" but the only sound I could get out was like the chirping of a bird. I tried to stand up—with success. I turned towards the couch, took a few steps, and then collapsed slowly. It looked as though I sat down lazily and then immediately lay down across the couch.

And all at once she was there. I realised later she interpreted my actions quite differently. I did not hear what she was saying, because her voice and all other sounds had lost their character and had become a monotonous whistling noise. I no longer saw in her Ruth Stein, or a half-naked woman; I saw a huge dog lying on me with the full weight of its body, tearing off my shirt and pulling at my trousers and licking my face and chest with its dripping tongue. In infinite horror I began to scream. The ugly bitch was startled, but she did not climb down off me. She merely put her weight on her forelegs, pressing into my chest. And then she was frightened and began to scream. She screamed at death.

She jumped about on her legs and ran on all fours around my couch, howling and barking. I closed my eyes. And when I opened them I recognised Ruth Stein. Covered with sweat, with her eyes bulging, she was searching through the pockets of my coat and my note-case, and kept looking out of the windows and doors, as though at any moment she might be discovered and seized. She was no longer smiling; only fear and haste disfigured her swollen face. She threw my coat on the floor and reached for me, her fingers spread out as though she was prepared to strangle me. Again I closed my eyes. I felt her turn me over on my stomach and go through the pockets of my trousers. The money I had received from Colonel Howard was still there. She took it and left.

She returned once more. For her handbag, her broad hat, and the red jacket. In her haste she knocked over a

chair, and screamed with fright. Then she disappeared for good.

I could hear my throat rattling. I tried to speak. It was difficult, but I succeeded. The first word that came through the rattling and which I understood was "Moth-er!" and then, "Mother, come and help me, I'm dying!" In a moment I called out another name, a woman's name, but I forget what name it was. I wondered why I was crying so much.

In about twenty minutes strength returned to all my limbs. I could sit; I could stand; and then I could walk. I wiped my tear-stained face with a handkerchief and said to myself in confusion, 'So that's what the first, slight stroke feels like!'

CHAPTER TEN

"**F**ORGIVE me, Doctor." Alfons welcomed me to my apartment that evening. "I always seem to come either when you're not here or when you're asleep. For God's sake, what have you done? You look like hell!"

I sat down with difficulty and pushed away the glass he offered me.

"It's a miracle that I got here at all. Alfons, my friend, something completely unexpected happened today. I've had a small cerebral hæmorrhage. I can have more strokes. To put it bluntly, we have not much time left."

He was disturbed. He put his hand on my shoulder and looked sympathetically into my eyes for a moment. Then he spoke in a consoling tone of voice, without conviction, bitterly, and without enthusiasm.

"I'm terribly sorry! I'll admit you alarmed me, but still you don't look like a man with one foot in the grave. You say we haven't much time left. Time for what?"

"It doesn't matter whether I die now or in twenty years. The important thing is that death touched me today and such an experience is never without consequences. I suddenly lost interest in a number of things and I decided to end your treatment as soon as possible. Alfons, you know I've liked you from the very first moment. You have nightmares in your sleepless nights because you can't decide to do that last—what makes you think it will be the last?—daredevil act which they want you to perform. Even a painless death seems to you more bearable than this new, senseless deed. I keep thinking that through some miracle I am talking to myself, as though I had returned to a time twenty years ago, with all the experience I possess now. And for that reason I say to you, and to the disillusioned, reckless fellow who bore my name and looked a good deal as I still do: Life exists even outside of people. In solitude. Alfons, go away, spend some time alone, don't take such malicious joy in trying to resemble the rest of this delirious world, as I did. Don't die just because life makes no sense—and don't meddle with your own fate or with the fate of others! Drop your weapons, embrace the elements, and leave passions behind. Take the first step yourself and the rest will come to you. Your solitude will be filled with people! I was mad to urge others to disobedience and revolt. I myself was the slave of the conspiracy I planned against a group of conspirators I hated. A man must lose absolutely everything if he is to crave life again. Today I lost my health and almost all my money. But all at once I felt a strong desire to sit down for a while and just look at the sunlight. This is all only theory, which I shan't turn into tangible fact unless I can convince you how completely I am on your side regardless of the consequences. Alfons, I didn't want to think about it, but I sensed it, and now I know: you are a Soviet spy and through that extra-

ordinary Colonel Howard you have got me working for the Soviets without my knowledge or approval. If you make the slightest false move it can cost my neck, too, and also ruin my mother, whom you don't even know. And in spite of the fact that you've misled me I ask you as your loyal and devoted friend: Get out of it. Don't destroy yourself, don't destroy others! That's all I have to say to you. Your treatment is finished."

He looked at me amazed, with that ironical smile on his face, and when I said that he was a Soviet spy, he jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Doctor," he said in the old sarcastic tone of a Prague student, "don't forget you said yourself the stroke you suffered today was in your head."

"Nevertheless my brain is working better than my heart. And take your hands out of your pockets! Look, my friend—and I do want to be your friend—there's no point in pressuring me or threatening me with revolvers. I telephoned Colonel Howard today, just after my stroke."

Alfons raised his eyebrows in curiosity, but his hands remained in his pockets.

"I spoke the password, and we had agreed that Howard would call me back at once. But no one called. I made a few experiments and finally found out that the secret number which the man with the giraffe-like neck gave me is the number of a Robert Howard who owns a funeral home in the Bronx. The Colonel apparently had a sense of humour."

"And from that you conclude that Howard and I are Soviet spies?" Alfons asked derisively.

"Not only that. I've thought everything out, weighed it, and considered it carefully. First there's my plan, which I submitted a long time ago to the Psychological Warfare Institute, and on which I've received no answer for eighteen

months. Then Colonel Howard's proposal, and his comments. Next that spy Brownell was killed right in front of my door with the help of American policemen speaking broken English. Then your behaviour, and finally the fact that the Colonel never intended to get in touch with me again, even if I had something very important to tell him. Alfons, you're working for the Soviets, and in spite of that I want to help you! Of course, as a man, not as a spy."

Only then did Alfons take his hands out of his pockets and sit down. Then he took a drink from the glass which he had poured for me.

"Doctor, I knew that if you ever started trying to decide whom your various patients were working for, you would come up with something crazy. I have no intention of diverting your mad suspicions, nor can I, because for example I do not know why Colonel Howard never wanted to hear from you again. And if I told you, an American citizen living in New York, that there are many policemen here who don't speak good English, you wouldn't believe me. So I'll leave you with your suspicions and ask only how you plan to help me. With preaching and moralising?"

"No, I don't wish to preach to you. Death is reaching out for you, too, Alfons, a death quite different from any you would choose under the worst circumstances. Even though you sense this, you haven't felt death's finger yet. But perhaps you will tomorrow, or perhaps in a week, and then maybe what I have said will no longer sound to you like the ravings of a senile man. Today I wept, God knows, and weeping I was able to see the true meaning of all these things. I called for my mother, who usually only stands in my way. I cried and called for my mother not as a result of my stroke, my weaknesses, my fears, and my self-pity. It was because I had reached an understanding which I had sought for a long time. I told you that I must ulti-

mately find out who I am, what I want, and what is left for me to do. I hoped to achieve this understanding with your help. But I succeeded even without you when I lay helpless while a creature full of life, energy, and bold plans sniffed and licked at me like a dog, when she howled with fear thinking she was making love to a corpse, and finally when she stole the last remaining bit of money from that corpse. Those seconds of death, with the help of a child of our times, enlightened me greatly."

"One of your patients robbed you while you were sick?"

"You sound interested, Alfons. It makes me very sad to see that of all I've said that is the only thing that interests you. I was robbed by Ruth Stein, a colleague of yours, who was probably another of Colonel Howard's agents. It was his money she stole, anyway. Alfons, I've only one thing left: to tell you what I have learned from my patients, particularly from that woman. If you hear anything you don't already know, think about it, and decide what to do. I won't see you any more, and I shall close my office again. I'm quitting the whole business."

"Thanks for the suggestion. You're a decent fellow, and you try not to make trouble. You've decided to set a good example for your patients. Only tell me, if you'll forgive me for returning to this subject, why Howard sent his agents to your office as patients, if he is a Soviet spy? What did he hope to gain?"

"That's perfectly clear. He wanted to confuse me and to have me watched. Some of his agents were to drop occasional hints to make me think they were American agents, and others were to behave like Soviet agents. He wanted me to accept his story in all its details, and to be lulled by the belief that the American authorities were watching over me, so that I could devote all my attention to you. It's you he's interested in, I'm convinced of that. And all

of those people who came to my office are without doubt Soviet spies. Of course, as you keep pointing out yourself, you can't trust spies, so it's quite possible the American authorities are after you at this very moment. Nor is there any guarantee that the Soviets haven't lost patience with you and won't betray you to the Americans. Alfons, this mess is so complicated no one will ever make sense of it. Colonel Howard won't even be able to straighten it out. He began with his own plan, but he couldn't foresee that I would also have my own little plan, and yours, just like all the agents he sent to me in the guise of patients. And even if he did suspect that something like this would happen, he, just like you, had no defence against it but to tell me that I would never be intelligent enough to unravel the story.

"I was to get you back on your feet so that you could carry out some glorious act of infamy. He called this infamy your last, great mission. He intended to disappear then, perhaps with you, or maybe to do away with me; I don't know which. Only in the meanwhile Alfons thought everything over and decided to use me to obtain poison. And I had the bright idea that I was not going to kill Alfons either with poison or by treating him and giving him the strength to perform one more daring stroke. Therefore I dissuaded Alfons from both types of suicide. And without even knowing who was who among my patients, I began to incite all of them against their masters and tried to wean them from their professions. Even if Howard finds out about all this he cannot prevent some of the Soviet agents in my office from becoming American agents overnight, and thus making his original fairy story come true. I think it is quite possible that you, too, Alfons, are being followed. If so, you are already working for the Americans, indirectly and involuntarily. This whole affair is out of the

hands of the Soviets and of the Americans. You have all delivered yourselves up to the Devil, no matter what side you're working for, and the Devil will ultimately exact his due if you continue to follow him."

Alfons laughed nervously.

"Who invokes the Devil, thinks of God. You think you are in the service of God, don't you? Look here, Doctor, let's stop this. You really did have a stroke, didn't you! Give me two more sleeping pills . . . well, one's really enough, I feel much better than I did, and I'm grateful to you. Give me a pill and I'll say good-bye."

"Well, then, Alfons, you——"

"Alfons has his own plan. Leave him alone, mind your own business and don't be inquisitive. What interest do you think I could have in the comings and goings of your healthy patients?"

"Well, for instance, Ruth Stein knows that a young man comes to my apartment at night and drinks with me."

Alfons jumped up, jammed both hands into his pockets, and shouted, enraged, "You just made that up! What do you really want, Malik?"

"Alfons, I'm not feeling well. Don't shout at me, it won't do you any good. That woman also told me that there are two versions of the code message about the *lost binocular adjustment*. She said that according to one interpretation it means *get him alive*, and according to the other it says *he is working for us*."

He trembled as though someone had struck him, and he made a horrible grimace, piercing me with a look full of hate. Then he said through his teeth, "Now I'd like to know whom you're working for, you clever cheat!"

His anger filled me with anxiety. I answered sadly, "You too? Do you, too, think I have to be working for someone?"

He fixed his eyes on mine as though he wanted to hypnotise me, and I saw that anger had dissolved his fear.

"Doctor, forgive me, I . . . Do you think someone might be hiding here, listening to us?"

"Nothing is impossible in this game. Why do you ask that all of a sudden?"

"Just because— Do you mind if I look through your cupboards?"

"No, go ahead."

I felt very tired and left Alfons to make his tour of inspection by himself. I answered with my eyes closed when he asked me what was in this or that cabinet.

"Have you a safe here?"

"No, I haven't. Do you think someone could have crawled into a safe?"

"What's in this cupboard next to the stove?"

"Rags and mops and all sorts of junk. Alfons, I'm terribly tired."

"Just a moment! What's in the bathroom? How come you have no medicine chest?"

"There are two cabinets in there, in the wall, behind the mirrors."

"Isn't there a clothes cupboard in the front hall?"

"No, just hooks."

He finished his inspection in about five minutes, said quietly, "I'm back," and sat down. "I can see that you really are worn out. I'll just ask you for a pill and then disappear. Unless you'd like to overcome your fatigue with that champagne which we didn't get to last time."

"You'll have to drink alone, Alfons. I'd appreciate it, though, if you'd stay awhile and if you didn't shout at me. This is the last time we'll see each other. I fear for you. It's a terribly stupid fear . . . because . . . I can't do any-

thing. One fights endlessly to achieve one's own freedom of will, and then is unhappy seeing others exercising their own free will."

For a long time I sat in silence and looked out of the corner of my eye at Alfons, who was smiling childishly, as though the inspiration to uncork the champagne had solved all his problems. Why was he suddenly so insolently calm? Where had he found this new self-confidence? The cork exploded and shot to the ceiling, I jumped, and Alfons broke into riotous laughter.

"What are you laughing at?"

"At you, Doctor. And through you at all those useless routines. Where is the firmness, the self-confidence and energy you had yesterday? Why, you wanted to stop the earth on its axis! And all at once I see an old man, tame and gentle, sitting and thinking that he is cowardly not to go to the F.B.I. and report his latest discovery, that he has been treating a Soviet spy. And at the same time this old man is afraid to moisten his lips with wine for fear death will strike out at him again. I'm not sneering at you, Doctor, I'm just amused at you. What shall we drink to, my clairvoyant detective? To the Soviets or to America?"

"I'm not going to drink, and I don't know why it is so important to you that I should drink. Drink by yourself. Drink, if you want, to a third, nameless land, where there are no Towers of Babylon nor labyrinths without exits. You have every right to sneer at me, in spite of the fact that I do not consider myself a hero."

"You are more than a hero. You're a man who knows what to do."

"I'm far from that. So far I know only what I should not do."

"By the way, Doctor, even though you have not treated

me entirely as I wished, I shall give you the three thousand dollars I promised you, so that you may see that there is honour among spies."

"But I won't take it, Alfons, because I would lose it again. You're quite right, in this world of madness a certain logic rules. And that logic says that people outside that world should not take money."

"Doctor, you're not outside that world, and don't try to convince yourself that you are. But if you don't want the money, you won't get it! Your champagne is superb, and I certainly shan't forget my last evening with you. I should also tell you a little something before I leave. What would you like to hear? Oh, I know. You asked me the first night what led me to work for the espionage service. I did not answer you, because I was not in the mood. Well, now I'll tell you. It was my desire for justice. That surprises you, doesn't it? But it's the truth. I was a flyer in the war against Germany. I was on the side of justice, wasn't I? In that same war I was also a paratrooper. Then I organised extensive sabotage in the occupied countries. Finally I was a member of a counter-sabotage organisation in England. It went step by step, always in the name of justice, until the moment when the just Allies began to disagree as to which of them was actually more just. I was forced to choose. I tell you, it's damned hard to make a choice, particularly when you place yourself in another person's shoes. First in the shoes of a landless Chinese peasant, then of a Polish priest in a Communist prison, and finally in those of an American scientist who has been deprived of all opportunities to work and cannot even leave the country, because some politician has staked his career on accusing him of subversive activity on evidence supplied by former subversives. My message is that we cannot try to be just if we wish to be on the side of justice. And if

I have spoken nonsense, be good enough to correct me, if you can."

"Alfons have you ever been afraid of anybody or anything?"

"Here we go again. Religion, God! I'm supposed to have feared God's justice, aren't I? Would you kindly tell me what kind of animal is God's justice and where does this animal live? You answer: *Ignoramus atque ignorabimus*, and piously close your eyes. Since we cannot know God's justice, we have no way of judging worldly justice. If you want to know, I do have fears and I do believe in a few things. I believe that some invisible person sees and hears all my acts, but I'm completely indifferent as to who he is. And he only looks and listens, he does nothing else. If this is the germ of religious faith, then it means that I fear God, but I don't love Him. He doesn't fear me, nor does He love me."

"And did you ever love anyone or anything?"

"I've loved too well, both people and things! Of course, people are much more volatile than things, and are much harder to control."

"Curious, Alfons. You're made of the same stuff as Ruth Stein. Only she's quite satisfied, whereas you're not. You don't by any chance know that fat, smiling agent, do you?"

"It's possible. There are plenty of fat agents. But if she robbed you she did so on her own account."

"My last wish is that you too will act on your own account. It's an odd thing, but while she was robbing my apartment that Stein woman kept looking about, as though she too feared that someone invisible was watching her."

"Take it easy, Doctor; that wasn't fear of God!"

"I know, it was an earthly fear, and the more distasteful

for that reason. It would perhaps be the worst possible catastrophe for all of us if technology could produce carefully selected omniscient and omnipresent people."

"That, Doctor, is the most frightful picture you could possibly paint!"

He drank champagne as a thirsty man drinks water. He always drank in great gulps, which is a sure sign of a confirmed drinker or of one forced to drink. I was sorry to see him waste the wine so flagrantly, and then I smiled bitterly at this undeniable proof of the fact that I was again very much a part of this life.

"What are you smiling at?"

"I'm smiling at my own pettiness. It makes me unhappy to see you pour that champagne down your throat without even tasting it. I imagine you do everything without savour, unlike Ruth Stein. Listen, I have an idea. The first night you wanted to tell me a story which you had manufactured for me as a psycho-analyst. It was about your sister, and about how you peeped at her through a keyhole. I know it isn't true, but tell me, did you really have a sister?"

He stopped drinking and held his glass in front of his mouth, while he looked at me with admiration and astonishment. Then he said with appreciation and a bit of envy, "You're no fool, are you, Doctor? What you lack in experience you make up for with intuition. You could have been an outstanding doctor—as if that meant anything nowadays."

"Thank you for the compliment. What have I done to deserve it?"

"You should know! Good Lord, man, why do you bother to preach when you have other methods of getting people to talk? You're damned right I had a sister! And a friend! And a wife! And I lost them all. Not through

the activities of the espionage system, like you, and not as a result of the barbarism of a totalitarian régime, but because fine love is a forbidden relic of the past."

He gulped some more champagne and became highly animated. Apparently I had hit the nail on the head, because this was the first time I had seen Alfons showing enthusiasm. His eyes glowed and his voice was choked with sorrow, anger, and irony.

"There's no conspiracy outside us, as you so foolishly imagine. Nor do there exist pure ideas and ideas which have been tarnished by politics. We have conspired against ourselves, we have used ideas to train ourselves for scientific and political barbarism, and we ourselves have called rats out from all corners to campaign against us."

"We? Who is that?"

"We who proclaim democracy, we the children of the great French Revolution, the heralds of Christian culture, the inventors of radio, television, jet aircraft, and the atomic bomb. In the last fifty years our heads have been so filled with excesses of freedom and knowledge that no room is left for love. We are allowed to love ideas and fetishes, but not people. I loved my sister, and I couldn't go anywhere without her. So my parents came, and the doctors came, and the priest came, and they explained to me carefully that my love was impure. I had a Czech friend in England, I would have done anything in the world for him, he was as much a part of my life as my own shadow. And one day I was visited by gentlemen whom I was supposed to honour and whom I had to believe, and they explained to me that my friendship was very nearly treason, since he, my loyal friend, believed in Paneurope, whereas they didn't. I didn't know what Paneurope was, and I couldn't have cared less. But thanks to these gentlemen whom I must respect and whom I must trust,

Paneurope immediately became a spectre for me, a Devil grasping my life in his claw. So our friendship ended in a fight, in which he drew blood and I wounded him. I lost a friend for Paneurope, but I was promoted in the Army.

"Then, too, I had a wife. She was a singer, and we were happy together. But they explained to her that love for her art was incompatible with love for her husband, that as an artist she must sacrifice her personal life. They convinced me, too, and degraded us both. We parted, soiled by adultery, which is compatible with love for one's art. Millions of hungry rats are ready to charge us. They have their fetishes and they have their saints. Little blood will flow, because for the time being we are fighting more with slogans and banners. And what is there to shed blood for? For the memory of the great Lenin or for the memory of the great Freud? For the application of the Zhdanov line or for the glory of the Œdipus complex? For Marx's *Capital* or for Gide's *The Counterfeiters*? For the pleasure of class hatred or for the analytical wisdom of not loving? And you, Doctor, with all your knowledge, your experience, and your intuition, and in spite of the fact that you like me, you saw me wave one of the banners and you decided immediately which one I stood for. But I, too, have a strong will, and I, too, can forbid myself to think. You refuse to think about your past and I about the specialised terminology of my thoughts and acts. The tactics and counter-tactics of the two camps have stolen not only the meanings from words, but have robbed even deeds of their fruit. Nothing is certain. It is said the Yalta conference helped Moscow. Therefore Roosevelt was a Soviet agent. Yes, no—who knows? They say the Communist *putsch* in Czechoslovakia and the death of Jan Masaryk helped the West, because it alerted the West.

Obviously then Klement Gottwald, the author of the *putsch*, was a paid agent of Wall Street. That's true, isn't it? It is said that whoever proclaims peace shouts for war. Right? And in the East they say that whoever wants freedom is demanding a government of criminals. Can you believe this? What do you want Alfons to do in the present situation? To run away. But you are trying to talk him out of the one real escape possible for him. You would like to know who Alfons really is, only he does not know himself. A spy, of course. But he has changed his name, he has taken on so many new names that he can no longer say with any certainty what his name really is. He has made many journeys on various missions between East and West, but no one trusted him on either side. And he trusted neither side. He has had enough, he is tired, he wants to sleep, and he is beginning to be afraid, without knowing what he fears. Perhaps he fears that omnipresent observer, whoever he may be. He does not know whom or what he has served in the past because, as he told you himself, the effect even of great political deeds is in doubt. He is threatened from both sides. He fears they may catch him and force him to make a confession which they themselves will have prepared and which they will embellish as it suits them. That is why he is afraid that someone may be listening. I came on tiptoe and I want to leave on tiptoe. Don't bother to give me that last sleeping pill! I'm so worn out by this stupid monologue that I'll go to sleep without it. Good-bye, Doctor."

"Good-bye, Alfons. I don't dare wish you luck, because it might be bad luck. Instead I wish you what I have myself found today—hope. We have been angry with each other, and we have often wanted to deceive each other, but in the end we almost came to an understanding. I shall miss you. Why, in you I met myself!"

At that moment Alfons embraced me and squeezed my shoulders, and my lips trembled slightly. Then he put on his dark glasses and left. And only after some while did I realise that he had forgotten to return the key to my apartment.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT was a lonely night when Alfons left me. I tossed uncomfortably on my damp, rumpled bed waiting for sleep to come—as I had so many times long ago, as I had that last night before I met Colonel Howard. Since then I seemed to have travelled millions of miles, only to return, just as wretched and just as disarmed against the intrigues of the future, to my bed, which so resembled a coffin now. In spite of my own and others' plans, Death drew me to the ground and let me taste briefly the darkness of the next life and hear the cries of unsaved sinners. In those few seconds did I really see the core of the whole business, as I told Alfons? Had I become wise? Had I found a way out or was I merely clasped in the withered embrace of Vanity, who was trying to confine my walk to a blind circle and crush my desire for a final act of defiance?

I had thought of all this before, as I lay on the couch in my office and ignored the unpleasant people who came for the cart and the remains of the lunch Ruth Stein had provided. I thought of this as the dust and dirt of the meetings between false patients and a quack doctor whirled about me on the floor. And I thought of it particularly when I learned that the trail to Colonel Howard led to a funeral home. At night, after Alfons had left, abandoned by the light of happy inspirations, I again solved the riddle of my own fate. Because I had avoided a direct view of

myself for so long, however, now, when I was faced by the mirror of the past and the present I saw with a shock how much my eyes had lost the capacity for self-examination.

Nevertheless what I had said to Alfons as well as to myself about the land of solitude, where the elements rule instead of passions—this was not the chatter of a hypocrite and a coward who wants to make his peace with life quickly and cheaply. I had seen this land and I had smelled it like flowers even before Death beat at my forehead and demanded an accounting. Yes, I had found this land that night, for example, when my mother came to see me and told me that Elsa was in New York. And later, when I went to sleep in Central Park. And long ago, before I was cast in this charlatan rôle. In my mother's memories, in Helen's words . . .

Helen! It was odd; I had not thought of her the entire time. She did not belong in the drama. How strange it is that there exist people who enter our lives and then go on, leaving nothing changed, whose only purpose is to fulfil their own fate. Helen was never more than a figure in my life, however much I tried to find a rôle for her to fill, whereas I involuntarily changed her life for ever. The circles of individual fates approach one another, touch, intersect, working out a Great Circle of circles. We have some control over our own small circles, but we cannot tamper with the Great Circle. Yes, this was the only discovery resulting from my transformation, if I could call it a transformation, but what did it lead to? Humility? I felt vaguely that I was beginning to be humble, but I did not know towards whom or what. How glad I would be to give myself up humbly to the hands of God, if only I could feel those hands. Instead I had given myself up to the hands of darkness, darkness without mercy, in which tumult raged.

Like a convalescent who is happy that he no longer feels pain, but who does not dare believe that he is well, I sat in my office the next day, waiting for Mr. Prengel. I intended to tell him to find another doctor because I was sick myself. I had not the least desire to continue in this medical comedy, nor to talk to him about his real mission and dissuade him from it. Alfons was the last person I had tried to dissuade.

This time Mr. Prengel came at precisely ten o'clock. He had grown thinner since I had seen him, and his old-fashioned pince-nez had slipped down to the very end of his nose. His voice gurgled through his nose and he growled still more loudly than at the first visit.

"I shall stay longer today, Doctor," he announced in the doorway by way of a greeting, and I answered impolitely and tiredly, "On the contrary, you'll stay a very short while. I have to close my office again. I had a stroke yesterday."

"I know. For goodness' sake don't make a mountain out of a molehill. I've had two strokes and I don't go around shouting about it. First I would like to identify myself properly."

"Your identity doesn't interest me. You don't interest me in the least any more, even when you talk nonsense like knowing about my stroke."

"That isn't nonsense. We have listening devices here and in your apartment. Even though we didn't get everything that went on in the office yesterday, we didn't miss any of your last talk with Alfons. Don't look as though you wanted to kill me; if this is painful for you, you'll be glad to know that it was still more painful for me to tell you about my most private sufferings, particularly when I knew that I was being overheard by a couple of characters—they're listening now—whom I wouldn't discuss the time of day with,

let alone my private life. I am the chief of the counter-espionage service of the Psychological Warfare Institute. I used my real name with you from the beginning, Doctor Albert Prengel. I kept from you only the fact that I was a doctor. Of course I use another name in the Institute. I haven't practised medicine for a long time. How long do I have to go on identifying myself? Stop being so surprised! I've done nothing in the past week myself but try to keep my own head from spinning."

I fell into a chair with dizziness. For a while I looked at my own arms, which seemed to be ready to fly in front of my face in a gesture of self-defence, but they stiffened unnaturally in a half-raised position. In my feverish confusion I heard the whining voice of this irritable, unhappy man who was pushing under my nose some sort of stiff card with a photograph and some more papers and newspaper clippings. All my suppositions again vanished on the wind. For if this skeleton was the chief of the American counter-espionage service, and all these documents apparently proved it, then everything I had imagined about Howard and Alfons was wrong, and I had not become involved in working for the Soviets. I would have felt considerable relief if this emaciated scarecrow had not at the same time told me that whatever I said in my office and my apartment was overheard by precisely those people whom I secretly hated and whom I avoided. Was it possible?

My face twisted with a spasmodic laugh which stuck in my throat. Finally I was able to say, "Your papers convince me of nothing. What do you want of me? Are you trying to drive me insane? You've almost succeeded!"

"Oh, go to hell!" Prengel muttered. "On the contrary, we want you to stop acting insanely, in your own and our interests. Here are some old clippings from the *New York*

Times with my photograph. They were published when I left medicine for the diplomatic service, and later when I began to organise the Institute with some other people. My original name and my real functions are not listed there, of course. Those things aren't usually allowed to be published. Well, do you want to see them or not, my doubting Thomas?"

"No, I don't. Prove to me that someone is listening."

"Easily!"

Without changing his position, and without turning his head away from me, he growled, "Hey there, dial Doctor Malik's number."

In a few seconds the telephone rang. Mr. Prengel's face did not light up with victory, but instead grew as dark as a thundercloud.

"Are you satisfied?"

I stood up, angry and shaking throughout my body, as though I had been stung by wasps. I began to shout irresponsibly, "Get out of here! That's a disgusting trick—there was nothing like that in our agreement. I am an American citizen like you, and I'm going to register a complaint against all of you. I'll go to the newspapers, your Institute will have a scandal on its hands like nothing you have ever seen before. You don't protect citizens, you deceive them, you blackmail them. I'll fix Colonel Howard, I'll twist that long neck of his. If you are a doctor yourself and if you know what happened to me yesterday, what right do you think you have to get me so excited?"

The unpleasant, gruff Dr. Prengel, who did not differ in the least from Patient Prengel, began to screech and wave his hands in front of my face.

"All of a sudden now you know what to do! Why didn't you threaten Howard with scandals? Why did you take

money from him? Why were you prepared in the name of your unfortunate and ruined past to endanger the security of the country whose citizen you now are? I'm here not to add you to the list of people I have to worry about, but because we are in mortal danger. You, me, your mother, hundreds of thousands of people, even poor Howard, whose neck you're not going to twist because a few hours after you saw him he blew his brains out."

I looked at him with my mouth hanging open weakly. I thought I might faint.

"I can't——" I began hoarsely, and swallowed the rest of the sentence.

"What can't you?" Prengel yelled without kindness.

"I can't talk with you as long as some invisible people are listening to us. That's absolutely monstrous!"

"Do you want to go somewhere else and talk?"

"Not now, I'm completely worn out. Make them turn it off, make them stop!"

Prengel shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, as though the request had come from a stubborn child, and then, without taking his eyes off me, called, "David!"

I did not understand why he was calling me David, but he was not talking to me.

"David, stop the machine. This conversation isn't important, anyway, so why bother to take it down?"

In a few seconds the telephone rang and Prengel stamped his foot angrily. Not at me, but at the invisible David.

"What do you want, David? Save your trouble, I'm not going to the phone anyway. Stop the machine, I tell you!"

The telephone stopped ringing, and the grunting Mr. Prengel pulled a chair over towards me and, with an entire chorus of groans, slowly sat down. The pince-nez

with the black cord fell off his nose and he spent several moments nervously and awkwardly looking for them in his lap.

"I'm going to start from the very beginning, so don't try to stop me," he began in a chiding tone. "I'm not particularly looking forward to this conversation. We shall still do a lot of arguing and fighting, judging from your nature and mine. But first let us be quite clear what we are fighting about. You know and we know what has gone on here and in your apartment, but you don't know what has happened in the Institute. Where should I begin to make it brief?"

He stood up and paced back and forth, as he did the time he played patient. He really was unable to talk sitting down.

"This damned business of changing names in our service brought Howard to an early end. I'll make myself clear. In some cases the public is not supposed to know the names of the chiefs of certain of our sections. In a few instances, however, we announce the name later when a chief resigns, retires, or is transferred to a completely different position. That was what happened in Colonel Howard's case. At his own request they recalled him from the Institute to Washington, where he was to be promoted and hold a position quite different from intelligence work. Only forty-eight hours after that unfortunate moment when he talked to you the press and radio would have announced that Colonel Robert Howard had been the chief of such and such a section of the Institute. But at the time all of this happened no more than four people knew about Howard's particular function. And suddenly someone telephoned the Colonel at the Institute. If the phone had been answered by an old, trained operator she would have said that to the best of her knowledge no

Colonel Howard was with the organisation. But a new girl answered, and, to make sure, she inquired at Information. Because the Devil apparently decided that was his day, the girl who answered in Information had formerly been Colonel Howard's personal secretary. Those girls are trained to act naturally in such situations. They are to improvise, no matter how dangerous improvisation may be. So she said that Howard was not in, and that she didn't know when he would come in or what he would do. Then, half dead with fear at what she had done, she sounded the alarm. We called a meeting immediately of a few highly cleared people and brought in several other people who had to be briefed. Who on the outside could know, or imagine, that Howard was connected with the Institute?"

Anxiously I interrupted Mr. Prengel's pacing. "Do you know now who called Howard?"

"I have no idea," he retorted, and prepared to go on.

"It was me!"

"You? You?" he shrieked, as though I had confessed murder. "Why, for God's sake, why?"

"I don't know how to explain it. He told me his real name. Probably because in forty-eight hours, as you say, I would have found his photograph in the newspapers and I would have wondered at finding another name under the picture. According to what he knew about me and about the work I once did for the Institute, I had not the slightest doubt that he was the person he said he was. But still I checked his identity by telephone as soon as he left. I had the feeling I wanted to do something to defy him.

"You are a frightening person!" he said. His tone was that of a tired teacher who has lost the last speck of hope that he will ever be able to make something of his pupil.

"Why? Did my telephone call cause some sort of public disaster?"

"Quite the opposite! It's possible that it saved America! But heroes get on my nerves when they stumble on heroism like a blind man. Please don't disturb me any more, I've had enough of your surprises. And now you might offer me a cigarette."

"I didn't know you smoked. Here you are, help yourself."

"You didn't know I smoked! Well, now whenever you are badly in need of a great inspiration you can discover that I like to smoke when I am highly agitated. Where was I? Oh yes, at that meeting we agreed unanimously that the call came from an enemy agent and that Howard was in danger. We alerted an army of detectives and had Howard watched and guarded. In such cases we do not tell the person that he is in danger and is being watched, because his caution and anxiety would lead to no good. Howard was discovered at four in the afternoon when he left his apartment and stopped at the nearest tobacco store, where he regularly bought cigars. He was seen to give the tobacconist a key and to take a letter from him. He took the letter home and a young man showed up for the key. The tobacconist, as we later found out, thought Howard was a wealthy banker, knew him as Wagner, and had no idea that in doing various small favours for him he was an involuntary actor in a great drama.

"Well, our detective accosted the young man with the key before he got back to the hardware store where he worked. He was found to have been ordered by Mr. Wagner, who was a good customer, to have a duplicate key made; then he was to take the new key back to the tobacconist's and put the original in Doctor Arnost Malik's

mail-box in his apartment house on Madison Avenue. They let the fellow go to carry out his orders, and we then put you under our microscope. And one other person—a young man with dark glasses who came to the tobacconist's to pick up the key from Mr. Wagner. All this time Howard was in his apartment. Someone called him from a phone booth and asked whether he had finished reading Chekhov. Howard answered that he was just finishing, and that he understood everything with the exception of one sentence with typographical errors, which dealt with a *lost binocular adjustment*.

"There it is again," I interrupted.

"At six-twenty Howard ate supper in a French restaurant, where by chance an official of the Soviet Consulate in New York was eating. The Russian just happened to want to go to the men's room at the same time Howard did. At seven fifteen Howard came out of the restaurant and immediately ran into a plump, overdressed woman, and apologised, while she answered, with an irresistible smile, that it was perfectly all right and took some matches out of his left pocket. Then they went off in different directions. After taking a few steps the woman stopped on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette with the stolen matches. A drunk bumped into her and knocked the cigarette from her mouth and the matches from her hand. That was not too great a misfortune for her, because she had had plenty of time to read what was scrawled on the matchbook in a hand which, as was determined later, was extraordinarily similar to the handwriting of that particular Soviet consular official.

"On the matchbook was written: *Pretend what comes natural to you, preferably kleptomania*.

"Well, Howard was smoking pretty strong tobacco. What annoyed me most about the whole thing was that

Howard should have anything to do with an old whore of whose thighs, like the Arc de Triomphe, one can say 'History has passed through here'. An order came from Washington to continue keeping all suspects under observation, but that Howard, who had enjoyed the highest confidence, should be called to account for his actions, which seemed to indicate that he was about to put across some last great stroke on his own account before leaving the service. I was assigned to go and talk with him. I visited him and he became very disturbed. He offered me a highball, although he knew that I don't drink. Then he burned a letter in an ash-tray. But the thing that had really made me mad was that fat whore, because I'd rather have an ulcer than have even to look at Ruth Stein, as she is calling herself now. And so without a long introduction I plunged right in and said to Howard, 'Nowadays, Robert, a man has something to die for. For glory, for cancer, for angina pectoris, or for hypertrophy of great ideas. But why must you have anything to do with such a monster in human clothing as that fat woman?' He smiled as though he was going to turn the whole thing into a joke, and then he asked, 'How long have you been watching me?' and I answered, 'Since four this afternoon.' He didn't smile again, but reached into his pocket, as though for a handkerchief, and before I could jump up and stop him, he blew himself into the next world right under my nose."

Mr. Prengel fell silent. He blew his nose loudly and cleaned his glasses for several moments. He was moved—much more so than I. The pace of events and incredible statements was so wild that it did not afford me time to think, or even to feel sympathy. Mr. Prengel had again begun to walk round in circles and was continuing his story, which he was again punctuating with rebukes, acid

humour, and irritability. He spoke as though he were complaining bitterly, and scourged everyone, not excluding himself, with grim irony.

"Of course when all this happened even the people in Washington who had had such limitless confidence in Howard began to wake up. And when these gentlemen wake up they give their subordinates brilliant orders, never forgetting to add, 'Of course you are fully responsible!' In the Institute we received an order to proceed with extreme caution and to be constantly aware that we were personally responsible for everything. We did not inform the public of Howard's death. He lived alone and had no close relatives. We found you and we found the fellow with the dark glasses, but that was about like finding a tail feather instead of the eagle. So we installed the most modern listening equipment available, first in your apartment and then in your office. They say it is a brand-new invention, really miraculous, it takes only a couple of minutes to install, and even if you know that the damned thing is in your apartment, you couldn't find it if you tore the place apart. We found an announcement in the newspapers that you were reopening your practice. Then we discovered the celebrated proposal which you gave the Institute and which had lain in a drawer the whole time until Howard found it and studied it as though he were trying to memorise it. I'll give you my opinion of your proposal later.

"From your conversation with your mother we learned that you were waiting for some sort of night-time visitor. That was all. I decided that I would come to see you as a patient; now I would like to bite off my tongue for making such a decision, because at your very door I ran into that queen of all virtues, Miss Ruth Stein. She does not know me, but I know her! In spite of all our plans not to arrest

anyone yet, I had to have that beast detained later, because I cannot go where she goes. But I don't make all the decisions, and over my head it was ruled that that swine, who poured out to us everything she knew without hesitation, and who is nothing more than an old tart, was to be recruited for service with the Institute at the cost of good treatment and a lot of money. In normal times I would have resigned rather than take such an order, but I can't think of that now. I used the so-called black-magic method on you and later, through you, on Alfons. That means to confuse, shock, and frighten the person long enough to trip him up on a single word. That is why I sent you a telegram signed Brownell, and arranged that when you called the number in the telegram you would hear a sentence which would surely confuse you. You are aware of how that apparently senseless method bears fruit, even though sometimes a bit wormy.

"The fellow with the sun glasses was also watched. He had not been in the hotel long and was registered under the name of John Day, from Cleveland. Except for the times when he visited you we knew absolutely nothing about him. I don't mean by that that we are any the wiser now. Do you know what Alfons does all day long? He lies on his bed in the Hotel Lido. When he leaves he puts on his glasses, and when he's in the room he's so hygienic he uses gloves to touch everything. A hundred times we have tried to make him touch some object off-guard, and a hundred times he has eluded us. Wherever he eats he avoids touching the glasses, and he is always careful to smear everything he does touch with the ends of his fingers. Without your noticing it he used this method successfully in your apartment. For instance in unguarded moments he continually changed glasses with you. I should point out that while you were in your office we had

your apartment searched several times. Up to yesterday Alfons wrote to no one and never received mail. He does not use the telephone. And God only knows what he keeps in his steamer trunk; we would have had to break the lock to get into it. At least we found out from his first conversation with you what Howard wanted you to do. Your language is a jaw-breaker and it cost the Institute unbelievable amounts of money to pay a translator who must be Czech in addition to being reliable and, above all, discreet. And because I did not know a discreet Czech—except Alfons—I had to have the translator watched, which cost a hell of a lot more money. My black magic bore its first exotic fruit when you told Alfons that stupid sentence, which still means nothing to me, about the *lost binocular adjustment*. Alfons knows more than anyone else about that sentence; it frightens him, but that is all we are able to find out.

“When he told you so readily that the man who telegraphed you under the name Brownell must be the agent called the Pig, we were really concerned. Because the Institute actually does employ an agent with that name, and that meant that Alfons knows everything about the Institute that Howard himself knew. Alfons and the Colonel must have known each other and been in contact with each other a very long time. Well, we called the Pig on the carpet and worked over him all night, trying to find out when and where he could have met a Czech whose voice we could reproduce for him, but whose picture we could not produce. We accused the poor fellow of all possible and impossible sins. Finally he begged us to give him a task whereby he could prove his innocence. My colleagues found him a mission. I was against it, but they out-voted me, and the result was that the Pig was killed. During the night he was to go to your apartment and test

the protective service which, we had infallible proof, was posted around your house when Alfons came to see you the first and second time. I am speaking of the opposition's protective service. And so the Institute suffered another disgrace. The Pig agreed that he would allow himself to be taken away if the opposition showed any interest in abducting him, and then we would, of course, stop them and find out where their headquarters were."

Mr. Prengel stopped for breath. Then he raised his right hand and stretched out his index finger as though he were scolding someone.

"I don't know how many people the opposition had in and around your house that night when the Pig knocked on your door and said he was Brownell. We had twenty. And in spite of it that bunch got away with him. The policeman who you thought was on the wrong side because of his accent was actually an officer of American law and order. He is from Brooklyn, he is very dependable, he is Jewish, and he lisps a little. Like others of our men, he had the job of knowing nothing and hearing nothing, but merely confirming the opinion of the crowd that they were after a gangster. The bloody and beaten body of the Pig was taken away in a truck, which was pursued by at least ten of our cars. Unfortunately, although we have ingenious listening devices, the opposition has a brilliant invention for blowing up automobile tyres with an explosive powder. Their truck made a zigzag motion and someone must have dropped the damned stuff on the roadway, whereupon it exploded in little yellow flashes. All at once you could hear a regular fusillade of bursting tyres on Madison Avenue. All traffic in one direction was stopped for some time and they got away with the Pig in spite of the alarms sent out to police cars."

Now Mr. Prengel lowered his voice lugubriously and ceased being angry for a moment.

"We found the poor fellow in Central Park a couple of hours later. He had been strangled. He probably refused to talk!"

He took a dirty handkerchief out of his pocket, spat something into it, and continued presenting his case against humanity and fate.

"Meanwhile we picked up the people who had been part of the opposition's personnel in and around the house. They were the usual human rubbish, mostly drunkards or complete fools, who were willing to act for a couple of dollars in a play about which they knew as little as they did about the directors. Since that day the opposition has withdrawn its guard from your house, and your meeting with Alfons last night was watched over only by us. To our great disappointment you said good-bye to your midnight patient, and now we have nothing. Should we arrest Alfons? After my experience with Howard I am afraid to. When he gets in a corner a fellow like that will care very little how he does away with himself. And I can't put him in a strait jacket, because, although I find people disgusting, I feel something like sympathy for your distant and well-read countryman.

"Last night when Alfons left your apartment he went back to his hotel, and in half an hour he went out again. First he took a bus, then he walked. He was apparently going in your direction, and he kept looking around to see whether he was being followed. On the way he stopped at a bar. He didn't order a drink, he just looked up an address in a telephone book. Then he went back to the street and, after taking a few steps, he suddenly jumped into a taxi and we almost lost him. We caught up with him only because it occurred to us that he might have

been looking for the address of your office and that he meant to leave there something he forgot to leave in your apartment. We were quite right. Alfons got out of the car right in front of this building and rang the janitor's bell. As soon as the sleepy old man stuck his head out of the door he gave him five dollars and asked him to give you a letter on Monday. For five dollars the janitor had an attack of honesty and reluctantly admitted that on Monday morning he would have to go to the hospital to see his wife, but that he could put the letter in your mailbox on the ground floor. Alfons agreed and put the letter into the box with his own hands—wearing gloves, of course. Then we learned that for five dollars the janitor is a character. Luck is never with us when we want to get in somewhere or make a search in the name of the law. Our identification cards had no effect on the janitor, the box can be opened only by the owner or the mailman, he knows the law, and so on and so on. Well, to make a long story short, in order to avoid another disgrace, we decided that we would wait a few hours. I hope you will translate Alfons's letter for me into good English. Apparently you haven't got it yet because it's Sunday and you don't look in your box on Sunday."

Mr. Prengel finished speaking and stopped by the door, as though his speech and his walk were precisely measured. Then he turned on his heel, faced me, and impatiently folded his arms, as though he had no intention of waiting very long for me to decide to run downstairs and get the letter. I had been seasick from the belief that I was riding on a roaring sea in an eggshell boat. And I wanted nothing more than to feel solid earth beneath my feet.

"One moment, Mr. Prengel," I said with a bit of hope, and rubbed my dazzled eyes. "My part in this affair ends when I give you that letter, right?"

"It's not up to me when this dance is over, nor is it up to you. Do you think you can stop whirling when the floor is heaving and spinning underneath you, just as it could if someone were playing music for you to dance to? I consider it my duty to talk with you some more and analyse Colonel Howard's case, Jiri Kaminsky, and, God help us, that Stein beast. Your life won't be worth very much in the next few days, because panic is going to break out in the opposition's enterprise. You're not exactly the stupidest person alive, so it would be a shame if anything happened to you, even if you do go crazy from time to time. But I must talk to you in the interest of your physical safety. I should also speak to you in more detail in the interest of your irreplaceable mind, which is much less well protected than your body and which often becomes pregnant. Of course, this isn't my duty and you have every right to avoid spiritual abortions. Now ask me what you want to know, but take it easy, because I won't have an answer for everything, and furthermore time is getting short."

Mr. Prengel reminded me of a gruff professor at a doctoral examination who is on the student's side not because of any special sympathy but because the student's success promises a quick end to a boring procedure. Our interests were now the same, because with his help I wanted somehow to solve quickly a question which I did not understand, but which I had to untangle if I was to have peace.

"I don't know how to put it. Howard worked for the Soviets and killed himself, so now you are actually trying to keep his agents in the dark, since they don't know of the death of their master. What else are you trying to do? To uncover an enemy espionage network? Neither Alfons nor I can lead you to the enemy. Alfons can't because

he has no contact with anyone, and the people who come to see me are all pretty much accounted for."

Mr. Prengel was bubbling like a kettle. He was angry again. But this time not with me, probably with all fate.

"If I had more authority I'd leave it alone. I'd take what I could and Howard's story would be finished. But unfortunately I'm the fifth wheel on the cart and then, too, our Institute is not only a warfare institute, but it is also psychological. And for that very reason we have to find out what Howard had in mind. He wasn't actually working for the Soviets, and I'd stake everything I have that Alfons is no Communist."

I looked at him just as hopelessly as he had looked at me.

"Mr. Prengel, have pity on me. You say Howard was not a Communist, he didn't work for the Soviets, and still he was secretly in contact with them and when you found it out he put a bullet through his head. You'll stake your life on Alfons and at the same time you have to chase after him with an army of detectives. Look here, one of us is crazy!"

He folded his arms, widened his mouth into a thin line, and turned his old head despairingly. Then he spoke quietly, unable to raise his voice because of his anger. He was tortured by anger.

"No one is crazy. But a new enemy is growing out of this cold war. A third group is coming into being, something worse for us than Communism and more dangerous than the Communists than our principles of freedom."

He looked about furiously, as though he were searching for a weapon. Finally he grabbed the nearest chair and with a plaintive groan placed it in the middle of the room under the chandelier. In a desperate belief that he had not been getting his idea across and had been merely talking to an idiot, he began to scream:

"Look here, this chair is Howard. Everything goes on around him, our service and the enemy's. For years, and years he carefully foils the enemy's plans, blocks them, thinks up ever-new traps and tactics, works for us until he is ready to drop, and suddenly, God knows how it happens, he stands in front of the mirror and asks: What is it all for? In that moment he is not satisfied with a cheap answer and in that moment, without even dreaming of it, Howard becomes dangerous. He ceases to serve and begins to think. But his marvellous brain is no longer under any discipline. Howard was no Communist and he did not crave money. He was able to do astonishing amounts of work and he knew it. As soon as it occurred to him that his great deeds and his unique ideas were not subject to an equally great and equally brilliant central idea he began to seek such an idea. Perhaps he wanted to use the cold war to achieve permanent peace. Perhaps he wanted to cause some general catastrophe that would transform humanity. Perhaps he had conceived a new form of government and wanted to install it, using the same methods he had used as an obedient soldier. I don't know. The only thing certain is that he sought the help of the Soviets to put his idea across. That doesn't mean that he wanted to work for them. It doesn't mean that he told them everything he knew. It doesn't mean that he did not intend merely to use them. Then the question was, who would outwit whom?

"But Howard's case is not the worst part; the worst is the story of the people who were to help him. All or almost all of them fell prey to the same megalomania: you, Alfons, Kaminsky, each in his own way and each equally dangerous. You began the whole thing with your cynical proposal to the Institute, and later you wanted to organise a general mutiny against the secret services. Mr.

cerning the lost adjustment, he couldn't or wouldn't decipher. Something tells me that the Soviets had finally abandoned the whole plan, but he hesitated to give in. Of course this is only my theory. He never intended to see you again; you were only to provide Alfons with sleep and courage. Then he would have had you put in an insane asylum.♥

"And how did Miss Stein know about Alfons's visits to my apartment?"

"Our people told her so that she could let you know she knew. They also told her that the line about the lost adjustment had been deciphered so that Alfons would learn this through you. We wanted him to panic and behave rashly. He was startled at first, but he calmed down again quickly. Black magic doesn't work too well on him."

"And did you also advise Miss Stein to seduce me?"

"Lord, no! That was her own idea. That beast is unsatisfied to the point of madness. Ruth Stein is really prepared to shower money on an ideal lover, but when she thought you were dying—we didn't know what had actually happened to you until we heard your last conversation with Alfons—she said to herself: If not love, at least money! She is so repulsive really only because she makes no pretences. Only animals are completely spontaneous—that is something the exponents of absolute candour should keep in mind."

"And what is she doing now? Do the Soviets know yet that she has betrayed them?"

"They undoubtedly took that into consideration, as do we. Her rôle is actually that of a police dog, and, as with a police dog, good treatment brings the best results."

"Why did you say that I am in danger and that panic is about to break out on the other side of the barricade?"

"Because Howard's death has left them without further instructions. They will begin to be frantic about what may have happened, and think that they may have slipped up on a mission of which they know only a small amount. They can't get in touch with Alfons for reasons of his own safety. Many people don't even know of his existence. It's possible that even the Soviet Ambassador in Washington knows nothing of this entire chess game. And as soon as that bunch becomes frightened and are left without instructions, which is a Soviet speciality when a plan fails, they will start to race around like mad dogs and destroy one another. They'll begin removing witnesses. And you are the prime witness. Now let's go and take a look at Alfons's letter. . . . Damn that David, phoning me again! Forget it and let's go!"

As we walked down the steps the telephone rang incessantly and Mr. Prengel cursed and swore incessantly, at the service and the Institute, and particularly at the invisible David. In my mail-box I found a leaflet advertising men's underwear and a white letter with my address printed in block letters. I tore open the envelope, under the sullen gaze of Mr. Prengel, feeling urged to hasten by his grunting noises. The key to my apartment fell out of the envelope. Alfons had printed the text of the letter also, avoiding the use of handwriting.

I read a few lines, then cried out and dashed back up the stairs to my office, with Mr. Prengel cursing and clumping after me. He caught up with me on the second floor and tried to tear the letter out of my hand, but he could not have read it, even had he known Czech, because his glasses kept falling off his nose. We struggled over the letter for a while, waving our hands and panting in agitation. And the telephone in my office was still ringing. The telephone finally gave me an idea what to do first.

"Call a hospital quick!" I cried, as though Mr. Prengel were deaf. "Alfons has got into my medicine chest and stolen all the poisonous drugs he could find."

Then Mr. Prengel ran to the stairs again and shot up them two at a time. He bounded like a goat. When I staggered into the office he was holding the telephone receiver like a club; his lips were moving wordlessly and he was listening intently. He listened for a while until finally in extreme agitation he cursed and then added, almost in a whisper, "I'll be there in a few minutes." Then he started to run out. At the door he stopped, as though he had forgotten something, brandished his fist at me senselessly, and said in a choking voice, "He has not only poisoned himself; he's blown himself to smithereens! He had a bomb in that damned trunk we couldn't get into. And before he swallowed all your pills he set a time bomb for eleven and put it under his pillow."

The doors were all wide open after Mr. Prengel left, and quiet closed in around me mockingly as after an explosion. Alfons's letter lay on the floor. I picked it up and read:

DEAR DOCTOR:

I am returning the key to your apartment. I'm sorry to tell you, but I've finally outwitted you. Your advice was good, but the road to escape is not always straight and smooth. I must not only kill myself, but after I am dead no one must be able to recognise me. I did not want to blow myself up alive, and for that reason I needed your pills. I eventually found them behind the mirror in the bathroom the time you let me search your apartment. I took all of them. You will find \$3,000 in notes in that medicine chest. You have every right to keep it for treating me, or you can give it to the Hotel Lido to pay for the damage I am about to cause.

Or you can give it to the American detectives—they are bound to read this letter sooner or later, anyway. They must not find out who I was, or what I was supposed but unwilling to do in this country. If they knew they would ultimately find another Alfons and force him to do on the other side of the world what I hesitated to do here. I'm not dying for a great idea, but so that a great idea shall not be carried out.

Your friend,
ALFONS

The letter fell from my hand and I stared into empty space. After several minutes my numbness left and I got up weakly and went to the telephone. I dialled a number very, very slowly, as though I had to overcome some terrible pain.

"Mother, it's me—Arnost. Please, mother, come over immediately. I'm in my office. . . . No, I can't come to your place. Please come here! I . . . I need you, I need you terribly!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE doors remained open wide until she came and closed them. Quietly and gently, like a nurse in a hospital. Then she turned slowly towards me, erect as always, serious, austere, and patient. And as she came slowly over to the patients' couch, on which the doctor was now lying in the customary position, I could smell the faint fragrance of the Old-World rooms in which I had spent my childhood. We looked at each other in silence for a moment, without greeting or smiling. She sat down beside me and put her hand on my forehead, then on my throat,

with the sensitive gesture of a nurse trying to find out whether her patient has a fever.

"I had just come back from church when you phoned. When did it happen, Arnost?"

"What do you think happened to me?"

"I would say that you had fainted, because I can still see dizziness in your eyes. Did you hurt yourself when you fell?"

"I didn't fall, mother, and I didn't faint. About noon yesterday I had a stroke."

Her lips twitched almost imperceptibly, as though she were about to cry, and her parched fingers crept from my neck down towards my heart and rested there timidly and softly, as though on a wound. I smiled sadly and took her hand and put it back on my forehead.

"This is where it hit me, not in my heart."

"Can you walk?"

"Yes. It was a very small stroke and it left me no after-effects—at least no physical ones."

"Would you like me to take you out of New York to the mountains or the woods somewhere?"

"We can't leave. . . . I lost the money I told you about, I was robbed . . . it's all right if you just stay with me. You've always wanted an opportunity for us to be alone together, anyway. For the time being I am not thinking about what I am going to do, or what we are going to live on. And even if my attack was not fatal I must definitely close my office. I hate everything here, everything disgusts me . . . and I feel a terrible longing."

"For whom, Arnost? For Helen?"

"No, it's better for both of us that we broke it off. It will surprise you but, suddenly, just like you, I am homesick for Czechoslovakia. Several times I have had such beautiful, happy dreams, and when I woke up I thought

I must have dreamt of the sea, because I tasted salt on my tongue. I know now that it was not the sea on which I sailed in those dreams. The salty taste was the flavour of our autumn wind. It is perhaps sentimental to be homesick for a country without people, a countryside seen through a child's eyes."

My mother was absorbed in thought, and her gaze was focused on a great distance, as it always was when her fingers worked their way along an imaginary rosary and her mind sought truth in human and religious wisdom. I was never able to determine whether her statements were her own or whether she had heard them from the simple religious country folk among whom she had spent the major part of her life. She said, "Everything that grows, blooms, and bears fruit finally falls back into the earth."

I thought a while about that sentence, as though there might be some solution in it. I found no answer, but I wanted to listen to some more of her sayings, so far removed from the speech of my present life and environment.

"I like to listen to you, mother, and I envy you a little, because I can't think in your sayings and allegories. Where did you collect them?"

"Oh, you know, at home. Sit down, Arnost."

I obeyed, and my mother was happy to see me sit down. She waited patiently for me to tell her how she could help me, while I debated impatiently what I should say to her. I looked at her imploringly, although a bit impatiently. "I know you have your own opinion of what happened to me. Tell me what you think."

"I think that you were tangled up by your own mind and that for a long time you were blinded by pride and weakened by illness."

"Maybe. But you speak in the past tense. Does that mean you consider me cured?"

Now it was her turn to say "Maybe." And after a while she added, "What happened to your new patient?" Although her question was not inquisitive, it startled me. Somehow it did not belong in the conversation, or rather, it was a basic question, as if my mother had had a moment of clairvoyance.

I answered, "He committed suicide. He died a hideous death. When I found out I phoned you."

"Why did he kill himself?" she asked sternly, although undisturbed.

"I don't know, no one knows yet, not even the police. In his last statement he wrote that he was not dying for a great idea, but so that a great idea should not be carried out."

"Then he was not crazy," she said decisively. "Have you had any difficulties with the police because of him?"

"No, on the contrary. . . . Mother, I don't know whether I ought to tell you about all this yet. This patient of mine was a political case. And as regards the police, they aren't threatening me, they're actually protecting me."

She was not interested in the police, she was interested in my patient.

"Why did you treat him when you knew he wasn't crazy?"

"I haven't agreed with you that he wasn't, as you call it, crazy. And why are you so interested in whether he was crazy or not?"

"For your sake, Arnost. Knowingly to treat healthy people—that's not right."

"But he wasn't healthy! Do you think a healthy man

would blow himself up like that?" I cried in a weak, high-pitched voice, thinking of the false patients in my office.

"I don't know anything about that. But if your patient died so that a great idea should not be carried out, that means that the poor fellow was healthy, and the idea was mad. What kind of a 'great idea' is this which turns reason into folly?"

My agitation grew.

"You don't know what you're talking about! That question is torturing a lot of people who had dealings with my patient. Yes, just what is a great idea?"

She smiled briefly, and I wondered how long it had been since I had seen a smile on my mother's lips.

"That's curious. You've read so many books, you've been to so many schools, and you still don't know an answer that every one of us knows who grew up in the mountains under the yoke of drudgery, in misery and poverty. We used to say at home that there are no blessed ideas in conflict with the wisdom of plain people. And the old women who brewed herbs used to say that great ideas, like rare flowers, grow above perilous cliffs. And therefore whoever pulls them up without looking to heaven may at any moment become dizzy and fall into the abyss."

When she finished speaking she stepped in front of me so that I would not tire myself out by walking any farther. I put my arms round her and kissed her forehead, and she softened in my embrace. Then we sat down on the couch and she took my hand in hers without pressing it, without stroking it, more watchfully than lovingly.

"Do you still want to see Elsa?"

"I really don't know what to do. First I didn't want to see her at all, then I decided that I would visit her and tell her something very unpleasant, because she not only was moving in with you but even went to see Helen and

put some sort of bee in her bonnet. But now there's really no point in our seeing each other. Maybe her attempts worked out well, whatever her intentions were."

"You know perfectly well that she didn't have bad intentions," my mother said reprovingly. "By living with her I'll save a good deal, and particularly now that you aren't earning anything. Arnost, is she really the hardest thing of all to forget?"

"Oh, mother, why do we have to go on talking about Elsa? You haven't the least idea of what happened between us, and if I told you, you'd be on her side and wouldn't understand me at all. You can't forgive and love at a moment's notice. I avoid my memories, both good and evil, whenever possible, because——"

"Of course! Because you still love her! It's hard to explain love," she went on before I could interrupt, "and the things we do because of love, but we have no trouble understanding our hates. Heavens, who's ringing at this hour? Don't these people leave you alone even on Sunday? Don't bother, I'll go and open it."

But she did not need to open the door. Whoever rang had entered the waiting-room and then immediately knocked on the office door. I looked at my mother for a moment and deliberated, and then said, "Come in."

Jiri Kaminsky stood in the doorway—or rather, a vision of Kaminsky. Thin, pale, unkempt and unshaven, without coat or tie, he was obliged to stand with his feet wide apart to keep from staggering. His lips shook before a few scarcely intelligible words came out. "I looked for you in your apartment . . . and now I'm over here. . . . I'm in a bad way."

"Mr. Kaminsky, I'm ill myself, and today is Sunday and you——"

His voice sobbed as he interrupted me. "For God's sake,

please, don't throw me out. I . . . I'm desperate!"

My mother looked at Kaminsky, who shrank from her gaze into the corner of the room and looked dully at the floor, as though he had not the courage to face any new danger.

"Don't be afraid, my son won't refuse you, but he really is ill. Sit down, I'm just about to leave."

"Thank you," he said in an odd, choking voice such as I had seldom heard, and broke into tears. My mother went to the doorway, took him by the arm, led him like a robot over to the table, and made him sit down. He raised his eyes to her gratefully two or three times, but always turned them away from her quickly. And he sobbed all the way from the corner to the table.

"It's going to be all right," she consoled him convincingly, as though she firmly believed it herself. Then she came over to me, kissed my cheek hurriedly, and whispered, "You *must* treat this man, because he really is sick. Arnost . . . don't be alone any more than you have to . . . and . . . here, take this!"

"What's in that envelope?"

"I just found this yesterday in a book. They're old photographs from the Orlice Mountains. Of you and Elsa. There is no need to look at them at once. Good-bye, Arnost. And come see me or ring me up as soon as possible. Good-bye," she added, to my guest. "You'll see, my son will help you and you'll be well in no time!"

I held the envelope full of pictures in my fingers for a moment, then shoved them quickly under the cushion on the couch. Kaminsky was no longer crying, but followed me with his eyes as though his life hung on my every gesture.

I said gloomily, "So you've come back. What am I to do with you? And my mother thinks you really are a

patient! If she only knew! How do you imagine that I can possibly help you?"

He began to stammer, "They—they beat him to a pulp. . . . And now I'm next."

"Just a minute, Mr. Kaminsky. No one mangled the fellow you're thinking of, he chose this frightful suicide himself. I can't help you. You aren't in Prague or Moscow, you're in New York. Go to the nearest police station and tell them everything you know. Then you'll stop being afraid and no one will torture you any more."

He began whispering, but after a few words his voice came back. He had found a bit of courage.

"That wouldn't work. I'm at my wits' end. If I go and give myself up they'll deport me to Czechoslovakia. Do you know what is waiting for me if I go back? But if you tell me what you know about this whole business maybe I'll calm down and get some peace. As you can see, I'm not concealing from you the situation I'm in. Something happened and they failed. Moscow isn't sending any orders, and they're terrified, just as I am, and they're killing all the witnesses they can find. I'm afraid, everybody is afraid of his own shadow. Only I'm just as helpless as a shadow."

"Mr. Kaminsky, pull yourself together. The Americans won't throw you overboard, even if you give yourself up to the police. They know all about you anyway."

He was now able to bear the torment of a direct gaze, and he looked at me numbly with wide-open eyes, like a dog who has been beaten and no longer has the strength to bark.

I stood up.

"Look, my friend, this won't do. How long has it been since you slept or ate? You'll have to get on your feet first, and then you can tell me quietly what happened to

you. Let's get out of here. I'm inviting you to lunch."

"Don't go with me! They're following me. Maybe they are watching this building at this very moment."

"All right, maybe they are. Perhaps I'm not in the proper spirit, but I'm not afraid. Don't worry about me, anyway. What would brace you up a bit?"

"Have you . . . something to drink?"

"Not here, but we can stop in at the nearest bar. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No, not yet."

"In that case go easy 'on the alcohol for a while. But let's get going."

He obeyed me and turned towards the door. When he had turned his back I reached under the cushion for the envelope full of pictures and pushed them into my pocket. We went out into the swarming street, glaring with fiery white sun which seemed to contain no light of its own. We walked painfully through crowds, in the deafening bustle of a city that shimmered in the searing heat. I forgot that I was helping this human wreck to walk, I felt that I was lost in the living and inanimate clatter, lost in myself and in the universe. And just as I was lost in the crowd, in the din and clamour of New York, so New York was lost in me. I knew the city from memory, but I had not discovered it through any feeling. If I were a painter I could not paint a New York street; if I were a writer I would be unable to describe a single one. I consist of no place and no thing, and nothing in the world consists of me. And yet, my God, in the far past, from how many landscapes, how many cities had my eager eyes drawn their essence into my blood! What wide regions bloomed in me then! How many places, how many things had I made friends with, and endowed with the lines and colours of my enthusiasm! How could I recall things and people

which had not been mine for ages? How could I again discover the world which had hidden her face from me, and how could I bare myself before her? How could I throw anxiety out of my mind and begin to suffer for people and not for things? To fear not love but hatred, to struggle with unbelief and not with the universe; and with people? How to restore my twisted heart? My day-dreams halted time, but finally Kaminsky wakened me. He was having more and more difficulty walking, and I remembered that this was a living man and not a lifeless burden leaning on me.

We went to the nearest restaurant and I made Kaminsky sit at a corner table so that I could shield him from the other diners. "Get a grip on yourself," I told him for about the fifth time, "or they'll think you're drunk and throw us out."

Our waitress looked like a doll in a toy-shop window. She was extravagantly made up, with a stiff smile, and mechanically restrained in her gestures and her walk.

"What would you like?" she asked.

Since Kaminsky was beginning to babble something I answered with the first thing that came into my head: "I'd like to be twenty years younger and have it all to do over again."

"You don't look so old," she said with trained coquettishness, and added indulgently, "I mean what would you like to drink?"

Before I could answer Kaminsky groaned, "Dry martini for me."

"Make mine the same," I decided quickly only so that we might again be doing the same thing. Then I turned with the faintest reproach to my guest who was so exhausted and still so alert.

"Just don't collapse on me for good after such a strong drink."

"I'm sorry, but I must have a drink—you don't understand!"

"I understand only too well. Just do one thing for me. Drink it slowly."

He obeyed me. He ate and drank slowly. He let me select the food, and we had fish, if I am not mistaken. Within twenty minutes Kaminsky was more or less back to normal. He took a comb out of his pocket and ran it through his hair, then he buttoned his collar and stopped breathing so rapidly.

"Now, are you able to tell me sensibly what has happened to you?"

"I think so. You, Doctor, are in the American espionage service. Is that right?"

"I've already told you once that I'm working for no one. Mr Kaminsky, I'll tell you my story as briefly as possible. Perhaps I should not do so, but caution be damned. I am a poor, unsuccessful psychiatrist. A short while ago an American colonel proposed to me that for a considerable sum I should treat a countryman of mine, said to be America's most competent agent, for insomnia and accumulated anxieties. He told me this patient would come to my apartment, whereas the Americans would send their people to my office as patients, and the Soviet services would do the same. It seems that it would be in the interest of the Americans to let the enemy know I was in contact with this ailing but capable agent, and they were to start looking for him in my vicinity. This was supposed to be the only way to uncover the Soviet espionage network in New York.

"I accepted and fulfilled the job. At first I did so for money, and then later so that I might reduce the entire

senseless plan to absurdity. After a while I really did not know whether I was being used by the American or the Soviet service. And the one real patient, the important one, did not want treatment, but instead wanted to wangle sleeping pills out of me and take an overdose, because he had had enough of secret missions and of life. In the end he found my hidden medicine chest, and took a pocketful of capsules. But before he swallowed them he put a time bomb under his pillow. This morning after he was already dead, it blew him to bits. In his last message before he died he said that he was not dying for any great idea, but so that a great idea would not be carried out. And I learned only this morning that the colonel who involved me in this entire affair also committed suicide when, by the purest chance, it was found out that he was in dubious contact with Soviet officials.

"I was therefore not used directly either by the Soviets or by the Americans, but by a third agency—the plan of an American colonel, possessed of a mad idea which could only be carried out with the aid of the Soviets. They say the colonel was not a Communist. What I tell you I learned from the chief of the American espionage service, who came to my office first as a patient at the same time you were there, and who did not identify himself to me until today. I asked him about you, and he told me that you are a victim of Communist blackmail. I should say that he is sorry for you. And for that very reason I tell you: Go and give yourself up to the American police."

When I finished talking I could again see fear in his eyes, and his hands began to shake.

"If I only knew that this is all true . . . that you yourself——"

"Look here, Mr. Kaminsky, why did you talk to me like this today if you thought I was one of your tormentors?"

"I was desperate."

"And do you think that a Soviet agent would tell you to go to the American police?"

"Why not, if he wanted to destroy me?"

"And himself too?"

"I don't know. . . . What were we really supposed to do in your office, when the man we were looking for was going to your apartment, and when those who sent us there must have known that?"

"Oh, my friend, you're in a better position to guess that than I. On the one hand you were to test my discretion and then report the description of everybody you found in my office. This was in order to avoid what according to the plan of the American colonel was to occur only in my imagination, but ultimately did happen. My office became a meeting place for American and Soviet agents. Now you tell me just as frankly and briefly what happened to you. Some of it I know and some of it I can guess. You concealed from the Americans the fact that you were once a member of the Communist Party. And when you were well settled in this country some Czechoslovak or Soviet official here started to blackmail you. Is that right?"

"It wasn't a Czech—or even a Russian. It was—an American."

"That's extraordinarily interesting. But I don't want to ask about details. All I would like to know is what this American wanted you to do in my office."

Kaminsky twisted his mouth as though he were trying to smile.

"This American is also no Communist, and he also got into the Soviet services for some great idea. He is an educated man and very wealthy. He was always friendly toward me until the moment when he showed me a photo-

stat of my old Communist Party card, which he said a friend had sent him from Prague. But even then he didn't ask much. He said that in the interest of a lasting peace I was to keep an eye on you and find out whether anyone had told you what the phrase *the lost binocular adjustment* meant. Of the whole affair he told me only this: several people in the West and in the East had got together to prevent wars. The main stumbling-block to peace was the American Government. A single great act was to open the eyes of every American citizen so that they would forbid further arming of their country and would force their Government to come to an understanding with all nations. This act was to be accomplished within a very few days by a man who was under your medical care."

Kaminsky gulped down the last of his second martini. Then he looked down at the fishbones on his plate before he gathered strength to continue. "But the main, indoctrinated organiser of the entire plan suddenly disappeared without deciphering the latest instructions which had come from the partisans of peace in the East. They said that only this one unknown person knew the code. Before he disappeared he succeeded in decoding the entire mission down to the last strange words about the lost adjustment. It is possible, however, that your patient, or even you yourself, know the meaning of those words. I was told several times that in all America only your patient and that one missing man knew what the great act would be. To make a long story short, I was to pronounce those strange words to you and then report your reaction. I did so, and I reported that my impression was that you had heard that senseless sentence for the first time from me. But this American became terribly angry and really began to blackmail me and called in some fellows who

tortured me and told me to tell them everything I knew. Then they sent me back to you. My job was to find out whether you knew anything about the man who had vanished, whose name they did not tell me, and whether you were on the side of those striving for permanent peace. This was more than any man could do. You know yourself how I decided to do the job. From that time on I've been beaten constantly, and all those mad people want me to tell them something I don't know, something that would do them no good even if I did know it. My apartment is always being watched, and I am followed every step I take. About noon today the American came storming into my apartment. He choked me and kicked me and screamed that that traitor patient of yours had just blown himself to little bits in the Hotel Lido, that I could read about it in the newspapers tomorrow, and they would do the same thing to me if I did not tell them everything I knew. When he finally took his hands off my throat I asked him why they didn't go to you if they did not believe me, and he said that your turn would come, that they wouldn't wait for an invitation to take care of you. Before he left he knocked out a tooth, here, see? Then he had an argument and almost came to blows with the man on the sidewalk who was watching my apartment. I took advantage of their quarrel and ran out of the house as I was. I do not think they missed me immediately. I have nowhere to hide from them, and therefore I decided to look for help from you. That's the whole story.

"Doctor, you haven't even touched your cocktail. May I drink it? Alcohol is the only thing that gives me a little peace."

"Go ahead and drink it, you'll need courage. I see even more clearly now that you must go to the police straight away."

As I said the word 'police' he reached hungrily for my drink and downed it in one gulp.

"Mr. Kaminsky, before you fell into this crude and senseless game, were you happy in America?"

He merely nodded agreement and his eyes filled with tears again.

"I ask you because my mother, who always has on her lips simple truths about life and death, and knows the answer to the ultimate questions, thinks that today's intellectuals are suffering from too much knowledge. And about great ideas she says that they grow like rare flowers above the cliffs, and that whoever pulls them up without looking to heaven may at any moment fall into the abyss."

"Your mother is wise, but I never suffered from too much knowledge, at least not seriously. And I have never fooled around much with great ideas. Like most writers. Recently I have become a bit wiser, and I think that the world can be helped through some person and not through a thing. Only through man, not through an idea—Hitler, too, had a great idea. If I could live again as I did until recently I would know what to do."

"When everything turns out all right for you, and it will, of course, will you have anywhere to go?"

"If everything turned out well I would have *someone* to return to."

He looked into my eyes for a fraction of a second, and it seemed to me that the timid glance was a painful, sad form of communication. In embarrassment I tried another topic.

"This man you mention, who disappeared, and my colonel are one and the same person, as I am sure you have guessed. Your tormentors do not know yet that he committed suicide. When he talked to me I did not realise that he was actually mad. He was cynical to an extreme—otherwise he was just like me."

"We are often cynical precisely because of extremes, our own or others'. And it's my opinion, Doctor, that all madness begins with going to extremes. Do you know, or can you guess, what plan these people actually had in mind?"

"Well, I can imagine—— It's only a hypothesis. My patient was—or at least he said he had been—an aviator. And now he was a spy. Your American envisions permanent peace and talked to you about an act which was to open the eyes of everyone in America. Let's put all this together. It's my conclusion that they intended to fly over here from the East one of those weapons which can level mountains and in whose production both continents are feverishly at work. They were going to explode it somewhere in America, perhaps here in New York, so that the people would think—and who could deny them?—that this greatest catastrophe in the history of America was caused by an unfortunate experiment with modern discoveries. Can you imagine what would have been the effect of the general indignation that would have resulted, and what would——?"

I stopped in the middle of my sentence because this time Kaminsky was able to look me square in the eye, and even appeared to suffer no pain in doing so.

"What's the matter, why are you looking at me that way?"

The muscles round his mouth were working.

"I beg you, Doctor, don't say anything about this hypothesis to anyone!"

"Nor you, Mr. Kaminsky! I am almost convinced that my patient will never be identified, and for that reason the investigation will never get beyond hypothesis. In all America only the Colonel and Alfons knew what the plan actually was. The others, including your American, are probably only supernumeraries."

"Who is Alfons?"

"Alfons was the code name of my patient. I liked him. I saw in him a bit of myself. Have you any theories about the lost binocular adjustment?"

"That code was apparently the last order from the highest Soviet offices to the organiser of the whole plan. It's hard to say— Perhaps it contained the date of the operation . . . perhaps . . . it proposed another person to carry it out . . . and it's possible that it contained orders to postpone or abandon the entire project."

"Anything is possible. But even guesses about great ideas are dangerous, so let's drink up and get going."

"Where?"

"To the first policeman we meet."

"Oh, Doctor, I'm so frightened! Why didn't you advise me to go to the police when I came to see you before?"

"Because then I had my own stupid, preposterous plan! The juggernaut in which we both find ourselves is really heading for disaster, and no individual is going to stop it. An individual can only jump off. I am saying this to myself as well as to you. We must jump off, even if we break our legs doing so."

"Or cut our throats," he said.

"I'm not sending you to your death."

"I'm terribly frightened, and I don't really know why. Would you order me another drink?"

"No, no more."

"All right, let's go!"

"First I have to pay."

"Then I have a few moments left."

"A few moments of what? What are you talking about? A few moments of the so-called freedom in which they hound you and beat you?"

"I'm a coward, and I never used to be. Do you

remember my story about the time in the German train?"

"Of course I remember it. But let me pay the bill now."

But he did not stop talking and now the words were spoken feverishly and in haste, so that I listened to him with a sense of uneasiness.

"First I became a liar and then a coward. I have lost my own soul. That is what happens to a person when he seeks to buy what he is unable to find within himself. When he is impoverished by well-being. Look out of the window; there's a policeman out there. What shall I say to him? How shall I begin so that he won't think I'm crazy or drunk?"

Before I could answer he began to move towards the door like a sleepwalker. He feared that further waiting would cost him the strength which he had collected for this great decision. I ran and caught up with him on the sidewalk.

"Tell him that you are being blackmailed by the Soviet espionage network in New York and that you must report to the F.B.I. at once."

He did not look round and did not answer. I stopped and watched him. I saw him walk up to the policeman and speak to him, and the latter acknowledged him and then scratched his head. And then I saw little groups of three men stalking up to the two men. There were nine of them in all, tall ones, men of medium size, and one little dwarf of a man. Although their suits were of various colours, and although some wore hats and others were bareheaded, their appearance had something in common; all of them had their hands in their pockets and all of them . . .

I ran forward and shouted, "Run, Kaminsky, run!"

I saw him once more as he turned his terrified gaze back to me. I covered my eyes as soon as I heard the first shots,

and then came the whine of the police pistols. When I opened my eyes again I saw the spot where a moment ago Kaminsky had stood talking to the policeman. It had been cleared by the flight of hundreds of feet. In the empty space a stain was growing and across it lay the body of a man.

CHAPTER. THIRTEEN

I do not remember what went on about me or what I did immediately after I saw Kaminsky's body lying in a pool of blood. Perhaps I stood on the same spot for a long while and waited for someone to arouse me, to arrest me, to attack me. I was waiting for violence to tear me away from staring at the dead man, on whom the excited screeches of automobile horns and human voices were converging. No one looked at me, however, and for a long time no one obstructed my view of the lifeless body, with the knees bent and both arms spread out, with the hands reaching to heaven as though begging for alms from above. Nor did anyone distract me from my frozen horror. Then, when police cordons and crowds of the curious drew a curtain between me and the scene of the murder, I began to talk aloud to myself and to walk aimlessly. The people I met looked at me in astonishment, and it seemed to me that each of them repeated a segment of my recent conversation:

I'm not sending you to your death.

Then I have a few moments left.

A few moments of what?

I have lost my own soul.

How shall I begin so that he won't think I am crazy or drunk?

I'm not sending you to your death.

A plump, middle-aged woman stared at me challengingly. I stepped in front of her and said, "I sent him out to die!"

She shrieked, "Oh, Lord, help us!" Then she hit me over the head with something, probably a handbag. Again I stopped, waiting to be arrested, but nothing happened. Behind my back the plump woman was crying in a high-pitched, asthmatic voice that I had insulted her and someone laughed at her indignant story. Her complaint and the sound of laughter came from far, far away; I had probably already walked on. Then in the pantomime of broken thoughts someone began to speak—I, someone within me, or perhaps various pedestrians around me:

At the beginning and the end of all mathematics is the number one.

One force.

One drama.

One evil.

One world.

Thou shalt believe in one God.

Finally a policeman stopped me.

"Look here, fellow, it's not my business if you want to take a drink, but you can't go around bumping into people. Can you understand me? Go home and get some sleep."

"I'm not drunk. You should take me to a police station and call the people from the Psychological Warfare Institute. I have to be isolated because I bring death to people—Howard, the Pig, Alfons. Now Kaminsky is the fourth."

"Do you have money for a taxi?"

"Yes."

"And do you know where you live?"

"Yes, I know."

"Fine, I'll take care of the rest," he said accommodatingly, and in a few moments a taxi was taking me to an address which I had mumbled. It was not my own address, however, that I gave. The cab stopped on the West Side somewhere around 103rd Street.

Suddenly I realised it was the address of André Delamain that I had stammered out to satisfy the policeman. 'When I first came to America I had frequently visited my French friend, who had now been dead for some years. Many summer evenings we had talked on those steps in front of the red-brick rooming-house, and then we had gone next door to the Greek restaurant to eat highly seasoned meat and drown it in red wine.

What was I doing here? *Where* could I return to? I had no place to go back to. Around my apartment and around my office marched death. So far I had been Death's messenger; now He would come for me himself. And there was no way out. Perhaps we had an appointment here, to ridicule Mr. Prengel and the American secret police. Or was I again to be made an agent of Death? I was no longer engaged in a merely human drama, nor in the struggle between two halves of the world. Espionage alone was not the issue. This was *punishment*. Hundreds, thousands of small roles were being cast into one single act of revenge by an angry God, who stirred up time with His disfavour and girdled it with lightning.

It had been years since I had been in this part of the city, but, as though I had never left, I was carried back with frightening speed to the days when I was intoxicated by ephemeral pleasures rather than happiness, by anger and passion instead of love, by an armed truce and not by peace.

I shook with fear. Not of murder, not of madness, but of the punitive campaign against me.

Not until then, freezing in the heat of summer, did I see with inspired clarity how I had become a victim of my own proposal, the proposal with which I had intended to blackmail and terrify millions, and which had caused my path to cross Colonel Howard's. And I saw far into the past, how my proposal had gradually distorted a mind because it lacked all warmth of the heart. My great, vile idea! Thousands of great, vile ideas of a race of dwarfs are charging in defiance of a single real, unchanging idea. That is the war of our times! That is the confusion of our tongues! There is our blindness and our madness!

Where to go? I *had* nowhere to go. I could not go to see my mother as long as the mad dogs were barking at my heels. My knight on a white horse, Mr. Prengel, was unavailable. My apartment was the battleground of murderers. No, there was no help for me, nor was there any court to judge me in this land. I was the object of a punitive expedition of Providence. How glad I would have been to be crazy myself, and not the physician of mad and partly mad patients!

With no idea of what I should do, I entered the Greek restaurant. Two nuns collecting alms came out as I went in; apparently they had had little success in that filthy place. They were silent, sad, and shy-looking. I turned on my heel and walked after them because I wanted someone to tell me where to go. They soon noticed that I was following them and waited until I came up to them.

"Can we do something for you?" asked the taller, a scrawny, pale woman.

"No, pardon me . . . I have nowhere to go."

"God is never far from you," the shorter said sternly and wearily, as though she had learned her line by heart.

Her nose and eyes were swollen from crying or from a cold.

"Only God has confused all roads so that I cannot go to Him."

"You must pray and give alms," said the first.

"We shall take you to the nearest church. We are collecting for the orphans' hospital and we pray for every giver, and even for those who give nothing," said the second. They apparently repeated the same words on all their alms-collecting journeys.

"Here is a dollar, sisters, but don't pray for me. You have a false idea of God's mercy. God does not split hairs!"

Both stared at me with panic-stricken eyes. They were not prepared for discussions of God and they feared lest they commit a sin.

The tall one merely stretched out a hand with a bent forefinger and said darkly, as though she were sending me to some shameful place, "There, do you see that spire over there? That's the church."

I went in the direction she pointed out because I really had nowhere else to go. The sweat was pouring down me, but my limbs were freezing.

"I wish it were Monday already," said a passer-by longingly. It reminded me how I wished every Sunday that it were Monday, on Monday I longed for Tuesday, and on Tuesday for Wednesday. I stopped so that I might think what sort of desire this was to send time on its enchanted way. As I stood there I found myself looking at the feet of a man who had stopped beside me and who had not polished his shoes for ages.

"Excuse me, but aren't you Dr. Arnost Malik?" the man in the dirty shoes asked pleasantly.

"Yes," I answered mechanically, without raising my

head. I thought: This man is standing beside me because I stopped to think about tomorrow. And now this is the end!

Surprisingly I stopped being angry or afraid.

"I am Frank Raymond. We're old friends, Doctor. You used to come to visit André Delamain and we met there several times. I'm living in his old apartment now."

"I don't know any Frank Raymond and my friend Delamain died years ago. What do you want? Am I supposed to go with you?"

"Doctor, what is the matter with you?" The owner of the old shoes was disturbed and put his hand on my shoulder. I winced defensively and looked at him. He was young, and tangled black hair stuck out from under his straw hat. He had a wide, impudent mouth and his nose pointed up at the end. The face wasn't even vaguely familiar.

"No, I don't know you. What do you want?"

"Well, don't get so upset. I don't want anything! I'm glad to see you after such a long time. Why, you must remember me! André used to call me the blind reporter. A reporter because I worked for the *Bronx Home News* and blind because according to him I never discovered a real piece of news—you know, a scoop. Don't you even remember that I once explained to you why I was divorced, and you smiled and said that you discussed such matters only with your patients and only in your office?"

"I'm very sorry, but I don't remember. I've been ill, I've aged since André died, and my memory isn't the best. Now may I wish you the best of luck, Mr. Raymond, and go?"

This time he put both hands on my shoulders and shook them in a friendly gesture. He withdrew quickly, however, when he saw that I shrank from his touch. His

pleasant, slightly fawning tone changed suddenly into one of familiar concern.

"What in the world is the matter? Why do you ask if you can go? Do you think I'm a secret agent and you're a fleeing criminal? If you can't remember me immediately you will later on. I'm only sorry I won't be there when you hit yourself on the forehead and cry, 'Oh, for God's sake, of course that's him! Why didn't I recognise him immediately?' Are you in a hurry, Doctor?"

"No, I'm not in a hurry. You seem to be more so."

His eyes brightened with an idea. If it turned out to be true, the idea would be very much to his advantage. This was clear from the way he snapped his fingers. And at that moment I could see that this fellow was not part of the act, that he was most probably the person he said he was. I smiled at him. I was relieved. I was grateful to him. His face lit up and he took me by the arm. And life again flowed into me, and with it a desire for freedom of action.

"Are you still doing newspaper work, Mr. Raymond?"

"Yes. I'm with the *Hudson Reporter*. They pay terribly."

"What would you think of the title 'Meeting with a Mad Psychiatrist'? I realise that you're trying to think of a title now for the article you could write about our conversation."

He let go of me quickly and looked at me, puzzled. What he then said made it clear that he was nothing if not candid.

"I've just thought of another title: 'The Clairvoyant Psychiatrist'. But, Doctor, you act as though you were off your trolley."

"I'm neither clairvoyant nor am I crazy at the moment. Mr. Raymond, I really do not remember you. But we

did not meet here by chance. I don't believe in chance. What is the purpose of our meeting? Have you any idea?"

"Maybe we'll figure it out if we go somewhere and sit down. Do you still drink that Greek wine—what do they call it, *retsina*?—that poor Delamain liked so much? Listen, this will help you remember: I was there in his apartment when you had to give André an injection the time he drank cockroach poison instead of wine."

His laughter was infectious, but it hurt to laugh. The story was absolutely true, but I was still unable to remember Raymond.

"Where do you want to go, Mr. Raymond? To drink wine with the Greeks? I can drink, but only a little, because yesterday Death gave me a smart rap on the head. But whether I drink or not won't change my fate. One way or another I'm beyond help."

"What are you talking about? A stroke? Why, you look like a young man. Doctors never know how to take care of themselves, and when something happens to them they think they're beyond help."

"I wasn't referring to an illness when I said there was no help for me. I'm wondering now why you bumped into me. Certainly not so that I could turn an unsuccessful newspaperman into a celebrated journalist overnight. My friend, I have a scoop for you. You're still turning that headline about the mad psychiatrist over in your mind, aren't you? But I know a better story. If I could only find out why——"

I stopped talking in mid-sentence and came to a halt in the street. This man who looked like a tramp and had the face and speech of a semi-intellectual was convinced that I was mad. I could hardly hold this against him, because my behaviour scarcely appeared normal. He was

imagining a story about a psychiatrist on the eve of his entry into a mental institution. And I wanted a stranger, someone not involved in the drama, to hide me until the next day. These two interests could be harmonised in the inscrutable interest of the third party who had placed this man in my path.

"Mr. Raymond, you say you're living in Delamain's apartment. That is very near here, isn't it? If you will, take me there. I need to sit down a while, or perhaps to lie down and sleep—I can scarcely stand on my feet. And in exchange for your hospitality I'll tell you a story which will immediately open the doors to the greatest American magazines."

"With pleasure, my friend. You can sit or sleep, listen to the radio, read, drink or not as you like, whatever you want. I have a little of everything except money. Come on! But I've got to hear your story. While we are walking you must at least tell me how you got here out of a blue sky."

I wanted him to continue to think that I was crazy. And nothing could have been easier; I had only to tell the truth.

"About an hour ago, maybe longer—I've completely lost my sense of time—with my own eyes I saw nine thugs kill a friend of mine in the middle of a busy street. Would you believe it, he was the fourth person I've unwittingly destroyed in a short time? My head was spinning from all this, and I hurried away from the spot where he was murdered, talking out loud to myself, until a policeman stopped me, thinking I was drunk, and told me to get in a cab and go home. I can't go home—they're probably waiting for me there, and I've lost confidence in the American police—so I gave the cab-driver the first address that came into my head. It was Delamain's address."

"Doctor, I'm green with envy," he said with flattering interest, "when I hear how some people have all the adventures. Nothing exciting ever happens to me. And who are these people who are killing your friends and are probably after you now? Gangsters?"

"No, they aren't gangsters."

"Well, who are they then? The Martians?"

"They're agents of the Soviet secret services on the one hand, and on the other hand people possessed of a so-called great idea."

"You don't say! And when did all this begin? I mean when did these people start to persecute you?"

"When I lent my apartment and my office to spies."

"And why did you do it?"

"I was a little bit in your present position, Mr. Raymond. I was interested in money, and then this mad sorcerer's dance of espionage intrigued me. I was unwilling to believe that it might ultimately cost me my life, even though I was warned at the very beginning. It's my duty to warn you, too. You're subjecting yourself to a certain amount of danger even now by letting me rest at your place. I'm not entirely sure that we aren't being followed."

My message reached Mr. Raymond. He grasped my arm still more tightly, as though in fear that I might run away. Then he spat skilfully into the street and pushed his straw hat on to the back of his head. After long deliberation he asked, as one asks a child whether he has a toothache, "And aren't you outraged at such a terrible experience?"

"You mean, am I filled with fury? Not yet."

"I'm glad. Well, we're here! I hope you remember the old place. Can I test you? What floor is it on?"

"Fourth floor, third door on the left. Good lord, it's

as though I had been here yesterday; I almost expect André to open the door for us."

"Poor fellow, he didn't last long."

"Mr. Raymond, I don't know why it is, but I'm unmoved by dead people. One of the people whose death I told you I was indirectly responsible for seemed to me like a younger brother, or my double. I liked him because I saw myself in him. Yes, the relationship contained a good deal of self-love. At eleven o'clock this morning he committed a ghastly kind of suicide, and now I'm incapable of emotion when I think of him. I was sorry for him as long as he was alive, as long as he was around, but now he is nothing but a misty half-memory."

Raymond spat again; then, realising that he had spat in the hall, he smeared the saliva about with his dirty shoe.

"What ghastly kind of suicide did your friend commit?"

"You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, because it will be impossible to keep his death a secret. First he poisoned himself with sleeping pills which he stole from me. But before he began to swallow them he put a time bomb under his pillow and it exploded this morning in the Hotel Lido."

"You're lucky that you can speak of it so calmly! But, Doctor, you must be careful of your nerves—of course I say this as a layman, but I've knocked about a bit in the world. Hell, where did I put that key? Here it is. Do you sleep well? For me, sleep and wine are all I need. When I get nervous I drink, and when I am calm I lie down. That's my advice to you, Doctor."

Of course I did not recognise Delamain's room. It had been transformed into a warehouse for old-fashioned furniture and modern bad taste. There was something of everything. The plant kingdom was represented by a potted palm, and the animal kingdom by fish in an aquarium

and a canary in a filthy cage. For literature there was a bookcase with plates, glasses, and bottles, everything except books; for antiques there were easy chairs with the backs slashed and the stuffing coming out. The graphic arts were exemplified by pictures of nude women with out-size bosoms, and modern technology by a combination radio-gramophone. The air smelled of fish, cigarette smoke, and moth-balls.

"What do you say, Doctor, shall I open the windows? I can't stand a draught myself even in hot weather."

"Please do open all the windows. Maybe it will help if you put cotton in your ears. Where shall I sit?"

"Wouldn't you rather lie down and tell me your story that way? I'll clear off this couch for you."

"You're very kind. I would like to lie down."

Mr. Raymond had his own method of clearing off a couch. He did not carry away the cover and the decorated pillows; instead he simply dumped them on the floor and kicked them under a table. Then with a single grand gesture he unrolled the bedding and with the index finger of his other hand he motioned to me, as though he were seducing me into a brief affair. He had decided that crazy people must be treated like children, and children were something he had no experience with. The sight of the made-up bed, even though it was not the cleanest I had ever seen, doubled my feeling of fatigue. I dropped on the edge of the couch, pulled off my shoes, then struggled with the question whether it would insult my host if I were to pull the covers over myself immediately and go to sleep. I had not solved the problem when I did fall asleep.

I slept about three hours, perhaps longer. When I opened my eyes, my host was leaning over me, straightening the pillow under my head. I sat up.

"I didn't want to waken you, Doctor, but that head of yours kept up a running fight with the pillow, and when it slipped you began to choke and I was worried."

"Take it easy! I wasn't choking, I was just snoring. I feel very refreshed, and I want to thank you very much, Mr. Raymond. What time is it?"

"Seveff. I think we might try a little wine and then have something to eat. What do you say?"

"I'm agreeable to anything, particularly if you let me just stay here."

"Just make yourself at home."

"I wouldn't want to do that; I don't behave very reasonably at home. Mr. Raymond, would you like to turn on the radio and get us some music?"

I dislike the radio as much as I do television, but now I wanted to sit quietly a little longer and speak only to myself. I no longer had any appetite for telling the truth about myself, and thereby confirming my host's conviction that he had a madman under his roof. I actually felt sorry for him. He would be terribly disappointed when he found out, as he must find out some day, that the sensational headline with which my odd behaviour inspired him would not be the least bit suitable for a report of our meeting. He would know how to treat the ravings of an idiot, at least for the *Hudson Reporter*, but he would not know what to do with the truth.

The radio played 'I'm Yours' and Mr. Raymond began to pour wine dreamily. The canary was annoyed by the competition and tried to outscreech the radio. The heat was again unbearable. I longed for cold water instead of wine.

Suddenly Raymond's hand jerked and the wine went all over his trousers, missing the glasses completely. Then he jumped over to the table, threw down what he had in

his hands, and ran to the door and locked it. He came over close to me and stared as though I were an apparition, holding his broad, impertinent mouth open wide in astonishment. The radio was announcing in a stern voice:

"We again interrupt this programme at the request of the F.D.I. We are looking for a man whom a policeman mistakenly took to be intoxicated around two this afternoon near Park Avenue and 70th Street. For security reasons we cannot give his name or a description. This man took a taxi to West 103rd Street. If he hears this announcement he is to report immediately to the nearest police station. He is urgently needed in connection with the explosion in the Hotel Lido, and as an eye-witness to the murder of the Czechoslovak citizen Jiri Kaminsky, who, as we have announced, was shot dead today by agents of a foreign Power."

"Doctor, oh, Doctor!"

"Don't shout, Mr. Raymond! I always get very upset whenever anybody screams. Turn that radio off."

He seized a glass of wine and held it to my lips as though it were a miraculous medicine.

"Have a drink, have a drink! So you weren't crazy, it's all true! Doctor, this is a piece of luck."

"Not so fast with your luck, my friend, and you had better go easy with that wine. What do you want me to tell you? Except for what I've already confided to you I know very little. And why did you lock the door? And close the windows again? Mr. Raymond, get hold of yourself; I don't want you to go crazy too. Now what are you doing with that pencil and paper? What are you going to write down?"

"How long have you been in the American secret service?"

"I'm not in the American secret service."

"You don't mean to tell me you're working for the Soviets? Have a drink, Doctor, you'll be able to talk easier if you do."

"Mr. Raymond, you won't get much more out of me today. I'll repeat: My office was visited by spies, Soviet and American. I knew that they were spies, but I didn't know for certain for whom each one worked. A super-spy came to my apartment at night; he was called Alfons. He was supposed to commit some great, bold act which would go down in history. But finally he lost his nerve; he was afraid of the plan and of himself, and he committed suicide. Are you any wiser now? No, nor am I! Let us begin again: A series of events in my office and my apartment re-enacted the cold war in miniature. In this small-scale encounter of two forces, two plans, there began to develop centrifugal forces and unforeseen plans which did not suit either the Americans or the Soviets. The Soviets abandoned the whole plan, and left their terrified messengers to their own fate. Since they have no new instructions these agents have fallen prey to their fears and are removing all the witnesses to the drama that never occurred. The Americans want to know what was supposed to happen. They can see what the Soviets are doing, but instead of learning anything they are collecting corpses. That's all."

His mouth was wide open the whole time and his eyes stared at me. He rounded his mouth for a moment, as though he wanted to pick something up and bite it, and his eyes blinked rapidly. Then he grabbed his head and cried despairingly, "I'd like to know which of us is really crazy!"

"Calm down, Mr. Raymond, we'll go mad one by one when we discover—or rather when we are forced to realise

that the crusades of modern society against evil are like Don Quixote tilting at windmills."

He began to be angry for the first time.

"Doctor, don't try to mislead me. You promised me yourself that you would tell me a sensational story!"

"And so I shall! I'll make it brief. Write, if you must still make notes. Begin like this: Yesterday afternoon I met by the merest chance a man whom the whole New York F.B.I. was looking for at that very moment. He is an important witness of events which the public knows little of as yet, but which in the past few days have shaken to their foundations the apparatus of both the American and Soviet secret services. These events began with the suicide of Colonel Howard, a high official of the Psychological Warfare Institute. His death has not yet been publicly announced. This remarkable Colonel interested himself for such a long time in the subversive activity of the enemy that he fell in love with it and planned his own attack on human society, a gesture which would at once rid it of all delusions and, so he thought, turn its face in the way of peace and justice. In order to carry out his plan he required help from the Soviets. But his contacts with the enemy were discovered and Howard shot himself. There still remained, however, the man who was to make the attack for the Colonel against society, and there were also the Soviet spies who were to make the necessary preparations for an act of which they knew nothing. And finally there were the American agents who were and still are trying to find out what the Colonel actually intended to do, and why he needed Soviet help. They were of course supposed to use this opportunity to destroy the ramified network of Soviet agents in America. The principal witness of all these intrigues is a doctor. He alone is alive of all the leading actors in the drama, a drama

of which all but the beginning is still unknown. For after Howard committed suicide the man who was to carry out Howard's idea followed him. He blew himself up with a time bomb in the Hotel Lido. And the Soviet agents are now getting rid of all the other minor actors and witnesses of the plan, which Moscow apparently abandoned at the last moment. The American secret services have so far been unsuccessful in preventing so many suicides and murders only because they are attempting to observe the participants in the play in order to find out as much as possible. The prime witness to all these events, the doctor, states that the entire bloody game of blindman's buff is no longer a political matter. In his opinion it is another outbreak of an erroneous desire for justice and peace. For its tactics and strategies the cold war prefers possessed heroes to genuinely devoted ones, cynics rather than believers, human models of the fallen angels. Even with the best will, people who have once fallen cannot help turning justice, freedom, and peace into their own opposites."

I said all this slowly, and Mr. Raymond wrote down every word. His face glowed with enthusiasm. When I finished he read through what he had written, and his enthusiasm evaporated. Finally he turned to me with the sorrowful face of a man who has drunk vinegar by mistake.

"Doctor, if you call that a story you're as crazy as you look. It sounds fine, but it has no beginning or end. How did you get into this in the first place? When and where did you meet this Howard?"

"Tomorrow, Mr. Raymond. I'm still terribly tired. My story is not going to run away from you. With your permission I shall spend the night here, and for the time being I shall not report to the police. I want to think and then sleep. All right?"

He drew his chair over close to me, sat on the edge, folded his hands, and filled his face and voice with affection. It did not become him. He looked like a mature man who had stuck a rattle in his mouth in order to make a baby happy.

"Doctor, have a heart! Providence chose you to help me. You said something like that yourself. Once in my entire, miserable life fortune has smiled on me. Please don't let this luck slip through my fingers."

"And what if, on the contrary, Providence chose you to help *me*?"

"Look, Doctor, I'm no specialist in Providence and I use the word only for your sake, since you act like a mystic. I can understand robberies, divorce scandals, and simple, everyday murders. And now you talk about espionage! But for Christ's sake don't make these political murders, which you must know a great deal about, into some sort of mystical apparition. People murder for money, for women, for revenge, or for political fanaticism. This Colonel sold out to Moscow. Yes or no?"

"I think not."

"You're taking years off my life, Doctor. Was there a woman spy in the story?"

"Yes, there was."

"Working for the Soviets or the Americans?"

"For both."

He struck his forehead. Then he stood up suddenly, as though he felt ill, and ran to the window. He went from the window to the door and from the door back to me. He groaned audibly the whole time. Finally an idea struck him.

"I don't know why I get so excited! You've given me the scent. Thanks! Now I'll go and straighten this whole thing out myself. I'm going to leave you. You mustn't

mind if I lock you in. You might have another idea and take it into your head to run away."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to have a look around your apartment house and then I'll drop over to your office and get an idea of that set-up. According to the radio I'll find secret police at both places. I know how to deal with them. I'm going to tell them that I was talking with you when the announcement came over the radio, and they'll tell me what I want to know. Don't get worried, I won't tell them that you're at my place. I'm just going to get them talking among themselves."

"Mr. Raymond, don't do that. I beg you, please, don't! It can very easily happen that you won't recognise the secret police, but they will notice you and follow you here. If there were only American agents involved the only disadvantage would be that I would not get to sleep. But you might easily have quite different spies at your heels!"

"Listen, come off it! I like to read horror stories, but I don't believe in them. Besides, I'd like nothing better than to be really followed by some Communist goon. Give me the addresses of your apartment and your office. Well, I can find them in the phone book, anyway. In the meantime, you get some sleep. Maybe when you've had some sleep you'll talk more sensibly."

"At least don't lock the door. That's childish."

"Will you give me your word of honour not to run away?" he asked sternly.

"Word of honour! I have nowhere to go, anyway."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I DID not want to sleep, however, when I was left alone in that strange apartment, whose disorder made it resemble a room loaded on a moving-van. I looked forward to the opportunity to talk with myself, to clarify for myself where I had arrived in this last act of the drama of which I was no longer co-director. It had been a long time since my daily duties and habits had permitted me to spend the night surrounded by strange walls and objects. And so it seemed to me in this new, scornful environment that I was hiding from a persecutor who was now nearer, now farther away, perhaps even within the frame of my own being.

I walked over to the window, and felt ill at the sight of the endless tumble of roofs over which a pink twilight was hovering. I looked in confusion into the lights of that poor section of New York, in whose slow swarming there was no life but only motion. In the ant-like streaming of tiny puppets in the streets Raymond had just disappeared; I was already unable to remember his face. So many people, both familiar and strange, with whom I had been in contact in the past days and hours had unrecallable faces. I suddenly desired to see my own face; I looked for a mirror, but none was to be found. Mr. Raymond's way of life apparently did not require a mirror.

I was unable to think clearly. Why not try another taste of wine? Surely wine contains less danger for me than people!

I sat down and closed my eyes, so that I might dream better, and began to drink my host's exalted and highly recommended elixir. I was nowhere near as appreciative of the beverage as Mr. Raymond had been. The wine was over-ripe, and I do not know whether it or the twilight

was to blame that I saw objects around me which were not there. Books in the bookcase, for instance. Where there were really pots, plates, cups, glasses, and bottles, I saw rows of books. I recognised the backs of the books in my own small library, which I had not touched for a long, long time. In an odd reverie, in which the wine or the momentary quiet of insistent time suddenly sharpened my memory, I began to leaf through these books in my mind and to read to myself from them.

"For truth to seem more probable a lie must be mixed in with it," I read in Dostoevski's *The Possessed*. And then from Byron's *Cain*, "I look around a world where I seem nothing, with thoughts which arise within me, as if they could master all things. . . ." From Unamuno I read, "Believe not the man who wishes, but the man who can, because faith is a gift of life, the grace of God." Then not once, but again and again I repeated fervently, out loud, the words of Pascal's God, "Console thyself, thou wouldst not seek Me if thou hadst not found Me."

I drank a great deal, and suddenly in this ferment of translucent words, feelings, and thoughts I came upon the white envelope which my mother had given me as she left the office, and which I had put in my pocket. I sat and looked at it a long time, trying to remember how it had come into my possession. Finally I opened it and looked at the pictures; I saw a photograph of a hill with a pine forest in the background, and in the foreground two smiling people with their arms round each other. I stared at the familiar picture for a moment without understanding, and then a biting pain shot from my head to my toes, and I nearly shouted when I recognised myself and Elsa.

I shut my eyes quickly, as though in the glare of a searchlight. And my closed eyes, which for years had

seen without recognising, dragged out anxieties from the mists, the distances, the storms, the shouts, the tears, the escapes, and the defeats of lost time.

I looked away from the picture into the empty air, which began to come alive with invisible shadows, movements, colours, whisperings, and words. This picture—this was our holiday in the Orlice Mountains!

I could see blue-grey hills among the mountains and brownish gullies in the hillsides, and I could see a brook winding among pastures and plateaux in autumn slumber. Under the arching branches of the oak trees lie villages at illusory distances like piles of coloured pebbles, and round them are numerous rectangular fields threaded with roads and pathways. The wind rattles at the roof of Martinec's hut and eddies in the fallen leaves. Doves are cooing in the eaves. We are standing on the terrace of an abandoned garden. Elsa has set down her knapsack in front of her and I am leaning on a shotgun.

"Snuggle up a little closer now," Martinec calls and aims an ancient box camera at us. "Hold it, one, two, three . . ."

"No, wait, the wind has mussed up my hair—Arnost, tell him in Czech to wait a minute," Elsa cries, and laughs at her struggle with the unruly wind which plays with her hair and her skirt, and steals the words from her mouth.

"Too late, he's already taken it! You'll look all mussed up in the picture, but it becomes you."

"And I was making an awful face."

"Let's go inside, I want to do some more writing."

"Aren't we going to shoot partridge today?"

"After lunch. And, Elsa, please follow the dog and don't go staring up at God or something. And when the covey flies up don't just shoot into the whole mass at random; pick out one single partridge and aim at it."

"You're an old pedant! I don't like the dog. Are you hungry?"

"I'll drink a little milk."

"I always want to laugh when I see you with milk all over your mouth. Haven't you ever drunk anything but milk and water?"

"Of course I have! What are you going to do in the meantime? Do you want to read?"

"No, I don't feel like it. I like to watch you when you write."

"And you like to interrupt me, too, don't you?"

The room in Martinec's hut is large enough for twelve couples to dance in. During the hunting season the hut is used as a sort of wayside inn. The hunters sit here at the last trap, swallow tripe sour or goulash, and drink beer, while the local fiddlers play for them. The room is filled with Old-World furniture, on the walls are animals' horns and a cuckoo clock and pictures of Martinec's ancestors; in the corner there is a hand loom, and the square windows frame a picture of the frontier mountains striped with fields, woods, and villages in various colours.

I sit at a gigantic table piled with books and papers, but I do not write. I am watching Elsa out of the corner of my eye as she walks around, leaning on my gun, and humming a soft tune in time with her walking. She stops in front of the window and sighs deeply with delight, turns to me, strokes my hair, and continues her walk.

After lunch we go to shoot partridge. In the evening the young people will come over from the other huts. We will cook mutton goulash over an open fire outside and sing songs. We have five more days here. Then we must——

"What are you thinking about, Arnost? Where have you wandered off to?"

"There you go, interrupting me again!"

"But you aren't writing anyway! What were you thinking about?"

"I have just come back from the future."

"Why are you so fond of repeating nonsense like that?"

"It isn't nonsense. Old people wander in the past and young people in the future. I'm possessed by a single idea, and I have been since I first knew you. I wish I could return to you once, after years and years, perhaps to this very moment, and tell you what I saw in the future."

"Arnost, that sounds as though you were afraid of the future."

"On the contrary, my silly. Are you afraid of it?"

"I am afraid of you. Sometimes. But less so all the time. Because——"

"Elsa, don't say 'because you're happy.' Maybe you weren't going to say it, but I would rather not hear you repeat something that everybody says to happy people. Get me some milk, please."

"Right away! I wasn't going to talk about happiness. I'm proud of the fact that we almost never speak in pat phrases, even though what we say may not be very brilliant. I heard a young French couple talking like that in a train once. They thought no one could understand them, and they told each other such sugary nonsense that I blushed all over. Arnost, I wish I knew Czech!"

"Why, is my German so terrible?"

"No, but I'd like to think in the same language you think in. It would make us closer. I'm afraid there is a piece of skin on that milk; wait, I'll fish it out. Tell me, Arnost, is there anything noticeable or unpleasant about me?"

"Unpleasant? What are you talking about?"

"How shall I say it without being trite? Forgive me

for using such a worn-out phrase, but everybody who falls in love thinks he is *different* from everyone else. How do I look *different* to you?"

"Must I answer?"

"You must! You asked so oddly. What is it?"

"I have never seen you cry, Elsa. Neither in sorrow nor in happiness. That is odd for such a delicate and sensitive person. A woman should cry once in a while."

"Oh, you're old-fashioned! What are you writing in German? What is that, anyway?"

"It's an article for a Swiss medical journal, the *Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie*. I'm writing something extremely interesting, particularly for young girls: '*Hypochondrie und Epilepsie*'. What else would you like to know?"

"Read me some of it. The first sentence, anyway. You know, your science is something I shall never penetrate, although I am a medical student. And you will never penetrate my inability to cry, although you are a psychiatrist. But for that reason alone we can always be new to each other. Oh, dear, I've said another trite phrase! Read to me."

"*Unter Hypochondrie verstehen wir Neurosen, welche auf der Fixation von hypochondrischen . . .* Do I have to go on? You can't imagine how stupid it sounds to me when I read to you."

"Your German is delightful."

"Oh, stop!"

"Arnost, you're very proud, aren't you?"

"Why? No, I'm not. Of course, it's natural that I should want to have as few shortcomings in your eyes as possible. Since you're so near, come over closer. And sit on my lap."

"But don't kiss me. You have milk all over your mouth

again. Arnost, you never could be possessed by anything if you are such a strict teetotaller."

"You're quite wrong. I'm not a strict teetotaller. But I avoid drinking precisely because each of my passions makes me as limp as a boiled noodle. Only once have I been to a gambling house, and that time I lost all my money overnight. But you don't mean to tell me that you have ever been drunk?"

"Would it disgust you if I said yes?"

"Elsa! Not at all! It only surprises me. I am completely unable to imagine you drunk. Do you know what? I'll tell old Martinec to get some slivovitz or wine for dinner. I'd like to see you in a gay mood! And I'll prove to you that I'm not afraid of alcohol."

"You're so childish."

"And you're so mature and wise. Now kiss me!"

"No, I don't kiss to order! Arnost, why does a woman have to be part of a man's property?—What's the matter? Another phrase?"

"Not so much a phrase as an unfair generalisation. When did I appear, for example, to consider you a piece of property?"

"You stupid, I liked it! When? When that mysterious Robert was here. We sat on the couch, and all of a sudden you pulled my legs across your knees so that I fell back on the couch. You two were arguing about something and I used the opportunity to observe you as though you were under a microscope. You liked it when I stayed in that position, which was not quite the most modest one, and that I had no stockings on, and that I let you stroke my legs rather far up. In short, you were glad that I was so devotedly yours and that you could demonstrate the fact to someone else. And I was completely carried away with joy, not from your caresses, but because of your boyish

pride! . . . And now, let's be silent for a while; all of a sudden I am feeling sad and anxious."

I could hear her repeat the words "anxious . . . anxious . . . anxious . . . anxious . . ."

I look about with my eyes wide open. The walls are getting closer, I am no longer in the hut in the Orlice Mountains, I no longer see through the windows the hills and the fading light on the hillsides. But I still see Elsa. She is standing two steps away from me and looking at me with large, blue eyes, which are full of meaning.

THOU WOULDST NOT SEEK ME IF THOU HADST NOT FOUND ME!

Who said that? Not she. Oh my God, what is happening? I'm slumbering in a den full of theatrical rubbish, beyond the window rumbles the stony tide of a monstrous Babylon, I am crippled, parched, I am drinking the wine of a man named Raymond who has left to hunt sensation in the market place of crimes, while in his apartment I hide from humanity and from myself and suffer hallucinations.

And she is still standing there. Like a stone statue. As a premonition of unhappiness. I cannot, I may not, waken her; there is no returning from the real future. She is still smiling. She still does not believe, does not know, that very soon I shall curse her, beat her until she bleeds, and that I will then walk in circles for years to forget what we did to ourselves. That I shall envision vengeful plans, imprison myself in blind alleys and in rooms without the light of day, that hate will explode within people and around people, that whole mountains will fly into the air. That man will be ruled by institutes of lies and ministries of deceit, and that their slaves will worship destruction and embrace fear.

She is standing two steps from me, and I can change

nothing, I cannot save our lives, there is no road back, and even if there were I do not know the magic word which would stop time and prevent the explosion!

The canary is not singing but screeching. Children are wailing outside and I can hear the voices of the innocents, killed in gas chambers, left to die in the march of hunger and death. In the neighbouring apartments the croaking loudspeakers of our time conjure up love. And she is within arm's reach, only she is speechless, lifeless, entombed by two decades.

THOU WOULDST NOT SEEK ME IF THOU HADST NOT FOUND ME!

I stand up and stagger, I fall on my knees before her, I can smell the fragrance of her skin and sense the warmth of her blood, but she, my one wife, my one love, my one unhappiness, is not of this time. She stands silently and smiles, like a personification of the question of the Beginning and the End. I weep and choke on my tears, and the more I cry the less tangible she becomes, and the more rapidly the picture dissolves into smoke and air.

I got back into the filthy, disorderly bed. My heart, my head, and my stomach ached, and I wanted to die. Darkness gathered round me and shame collected within me. I was ashamed for my recent helpless tears, for my pitiful appearance, for the hide-out I had bought so cheaply, for the promise I had given Mr. Raymond that I would not leave until he returned, and above all because I had no idea what to do next. And suddenly my shame turned into anger; I revolted and hated myself.

For a while I tossed from side to side, and for a while I lay motionless, watching the darkness draw curtains over the ruins and caricatures of this strange room, and then I sprang up in a sudden decision. I would go to see that

woman whose vision had left a cataract of light in my dazzled eyes, I would go to her tomorrow morning and say to her, "I do not know whether I love you or hate you, I do not know whether we shall not be terrified when we see one another, when we look into each other's eyes. But I can no longer avoid you because the rope from which you once cut me loose is still wound tightly about my neck. Free me from this noose!"

And scarcely had I finished preparing this monologue than I ceased to feel shame. All fury left me, and I began to drop into soothing darkness and from there into sleep.

Morning woke me. Morning with noisy milkmen, hungry children, singing canaries, and window-blinds rolled up because they no longer had anything to hide. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and looked around. Raymond's room did not seem so unfriendly to me and in the columns of golden dust the objects in the room lost their deceptive and mocking appearance. And the canary's song seemed to urge me to take pleasure in small things. My first thought was not unpleasant: Raymond had not yet returned and I could not wait for him for ever. The second thought was closer to the beginnings of a plan: I would not wash here, but would go to my mother's and take a bath there. My third thought was close to the goal of all my timid plans and was accompanied with quiet exultation: *She* would be living with my mother from today on!

I dressed hastily and then resolutely opened the door. To my great joy no one was on the other side spying on me. And the entire hallway and stairway were wrapped in silence which was almost oppressive. I crept on tiptoe down to the ground floor. First I went slowly, then more rapidly, until I jumped down the last few steps, as though a dog were barking at my heels. But when I reached the front

door my knees were shaking so that I could go no farther, and I stopped in my flight so frantically that a sharp pain shot through my heart and I cried aloud. Two people were coming in at the door, and one stretched out his arms in front of me and I tumbled into them.

In the first twinge of frustrated hope I knew only that whoever had engulfed me in his arms, to embrace me or to crush me, was a woman. I felt great, firm breasts against my chest, and my nostrils were invaded by a familiar perfume. And before I could remember where I had known that odour I heard the voice of Ruth Stein:

"So my boy friend here has brought me back to my lovebird! Doctor, how are you? How do you like it on my broad bosom?"

Either she was so strong or I so weakened that it was a considerable while before I could free myself from her clutches, although I used all my strength to twist, wave my hands, and struggle with my feet. Besides perfume I could also smell alcohol. In desperation, disgust, and frustration I bit her ear. She shrieked and released me.

Enraged, I looked at these two intruders, and then immediately looked around for some weapon. Ruth Stein and Raymond! She was tight, and he was so drunk that he could neither walk straight nor stand upright. In spite of the pain I had caused her by biting her she bared her teeth at me in a smile, and he rested his backside against the door like a great sack in which he had something alive and moving and which might at any moment collapse. He tried to touch my chest with his hand, as though he wanted to tell me something, but his hand would not obey him and fell against his thigh. At this remarkably unsuccessful act he bleated, "How come you two know each other, you son-of-a-bitch?"

He meant no evil by this insult, for he winked roguishly

at each of us in turn. I went up to him sharply and tried to prise him away from the door, but as though he were bewitched I could not move his wavering body, which seemed to be glued to the door-post. While I was pulling at him he exhaled bitter-sweet vapour under my nose and sputtered fragmentary words in my face.

"You. . . Doctor . . . you son-of-a-bitch . . . you lied to me . . . and I brought you a whore . . . and we got drunk first . . . and now you're going to tell me . . . Raymond is a good guy but you're not going to sponge off him twice. Tell me what you know and then we can both take her and . . ."

Before he could say what we might both do with Ruth Stein he received a sharp slap in the face from her which knocked him to the floor. Completely stunned by Miss Stein's success with a single blow where I had not succeeded with both hands and all my strength, I looked at her, completely defenceless. She repaid my recognition by blowing me a kiss, and put her arm round me. From her ear came three drops of blood.

A door opened at the end of the hall and a frowzy head appeared. "You damn drunks, if you don't shut up I'll send my dog after you!"

And indeed a dog growled somewhere behind this dishevelled, unpleasant man.

Ashamed and embarrassed, I turned and went to the apartment of the man who was shuffling after us on all fours and babbling, "You bastards, I'll fix you when I get up!"

In his exalted state the word 'bastard' was apparently meant as flattery.

"Miss Stein, get your hands off me! I feel ill whenever you touch me."

"You'll get over that, Doctor. You'll have to get used

to the feel of a body against yours. What are we going to do with this drunken pig? And where are you taking me?"

I did not answer; I could not answer, I was so consumed with humiliation and rage. And so we climbed the stairs like angry lovers in a brothel, followed by a host who had not invited us and who was himself returning home on his hands and knees.

"This is a fine pig-pen," said Ruth Stein, looking around at the accumulation of junk in Raymond's apartment. "How did you get here?"

"You tell me first how you found Raymond."

"So Raymond's that jerk's name. Well, he was sniffing around your apartment and your office, and they sent me after him so we could worry each other awhile and I could find out what he was after. He's a discreet talker. In exchange for a little whisky in a bar and for letting him paw my breasts now and then he told me his life story. But he didn't mention you or tell me what he was really looking for. We've finally got them all in the cooler, Doctor. You're safe. Boy, I'm telling you, they led us a chase!"

"Who are *we*? The old firm or the new one?"

"You're a bird! We don't have to talk in symbols any more—I can tell you that I'm working for the American Government. Does this fool have anything here to eat or drink? Hey, you, get up on your feet! I'm hungry and I want something to drink," she welcomed Raymond, who was kneeling in the doorway and making faces at us.

"I want to get out of here!" I said to both of them imploringly and contritely.

"You wait here," she said convincingly, but without a hint of commanding.

"Yeah, you're going to stay here," Raymond burred

after her. "You're not going to cheat me. You promised me a nice story and I'm going to get it out of you or you'll be sorry. Don't forget, I told you!" He succeeded in rising from a kneeling position to a squat.

"You shut up for a while, you stupid jerk. I want to discuss some important matters with the doctor. Then maybe I'll give you some attention if you're good. Doctor, if I were you I'd sit still and listen to what's happened. You'll calm down when you hear. They want to send you to an insane asylum!"

"Who are *they*?" I asked with a frown, but I could feel my anxiety rising again.

"You know; the people I'm working for."

"Thank you for the warning. Don't you think that's all the more reason why I should get out of here?"

"You stay here!" Raymond sniffled.

"Quiet, don't interrupt," Ruth Stein warned him, without changing her tone of a jovial, self-assured, kindly lady. She was vulgar in her words only, not in her voice. "You're not going to get rid of me that quickly, Doctor. I'm good luck to you. We can still go to Mexico. And only I can lead you to the promised land."

"Stop it, Miss Stein! It was easier to watch you steal my money than it is to hear your proposals now. And, by the way, your superiors know that you robbed me."

She was not the least bit embarrassed. Her loving smile broadened.

"That was a mistake which I corrected as soon as I had time. I didn't rob *you* of anything; I took money from a man who I was convinced was dead. And why would a corpse need money?"

"You're revolting!"

"And I could kiss you!" she sighed, half closing her eyes.

I looked at her concentratedly, trying to find a shadow of sarcasm, malice, or refined cruelty in her face. But I discovered nothing of the sort. And then it occurred to me that this gentle talk and the rich array of spontaneous smiles were the manifestations of a greater evil and of immorality raised to its highest pitch. She came from a world in which crimes were not accompanied by cries, beatings, and hysteria, but by open friendliness, kindness, and gentleness.

I did not want to stop talking, but I did not know what more to say. So I asked what time it was. According to Raymond it was seven-thirty, and according to Miss Stein it was already eight. In the meantime Raymond had lain down on the bed and was breathing hoarsely. Ruth Stein sat on the corner of the table and pulled her skirt considerably above her knees. She played with a large black handbag in her lap. She looked at me fondly and squinted her eyes knowingly, as much as to say, "I know something, and if you'll be good, I'll tell you!" And then she said it, although I had not been particularly good.

"I have still more money in this handbag. I found it behind the mirror in your bathroom. And if you find me repulsive, then you needn't keep looking at my thighs whenever I pull my skirt up a bit. Or do you find only my face disgusting and not my body?"

I blushed to the roots of my hair and turned my back on her. But then I had to see Raymond hiccup into his pillow.

"I didn't mean to be mean," she placated me. "My lap always calms the men down. The gentler guys warm up as soon as they get a look at my knees, and the tougher ones soften up when they touch me. But let's get back to money! I had a little something to do with three detectives in your office when the opposition rubbed Kaminsky out.

And I picked up a letter off the floor, which would still be there, if it weren't for me. You should be proud of me. Although I had to work like a dog all yesterday afternoon—there were fifty arrests, three shot dead trying to escape, and five wounded, and I was there through all of it—nevertheless in my free time I was working for you. I found a translator who translated the letter out of your beautiful language. For nothing. When I found out what Alfons told you before he died, I decided it was high time to take a little trip to investigate your apartment. There were fifteen detectives there. But I got what I wanted out of the medicine chest right under their noses. Of course, I burned Alfons's letter right away. Someone might demand the money to pay for the damage he caused in the Hotel Lido. Well, now what kind of a person am I?"

"I can't find words for it Miss Stein. May I go now?"

"Well, if you insist, go. But the house is undoubtedly already being watched, and in a few moments the men will be in here. You might as well assume that I've been followed up here. I wouldn't take it too lightly; I've overheard a lot about you. Sure, the affair is over, but they say there'll be repercussions in the newspapers. You're a pretty undesirable witness, and a little cracked besides, and your patients will scarcely give you a good recommendation. Sure, go, if you want!"

"He stays here!" Raymond cried. "He's going to tell me what he knows about these political murders!" He was able to stand, provided he planted his feet wide apart, and he tried walking. It was difficult, but he managed a few steps.

"Look, stupid, get it out of your head once and for all that you're going to get something from the doctor that'll make you rich. He doesn't know s-t, if I have to put it

that way. And that's just how much everybody else knows! If you were an experienced newspaperman you would have known long ago that a political murderer never knows why he kills people. But you're a fool! Let us alone for a few more minutes, and then I'll take care of you."

"What do you want of me?" I asked dejectedly, losing the courage to leave until I could learn more.

"Come over here!"

I did as she said, and she put her arms round me and pressed me to her groin. I was unable to defend myself. She whispered something and from time to time she stroked my face or my hair. I stared at her; she was fondling me as one does a child, she talked to me and comforted me, and of all she said I understood only that she was also threatened in some way—I gathered it was always so in her trade—that she had sent her own money to Mexico long ago, and that she would gladly add that money to what I had received from Alfons and which she had in her bag. She would take care of me in Mexico as she would her own child, and she wondered whether her proposition was so much worse than those that other people were able to make to me at this time, or than I could make myself. I was again seized with shame. I was ashamed of my own physical and mental paralysis, and of the suspicion that the pressure which Ruth Stein was rhythmically exerting against me with her thighs would soon cease to be unpleasant. There was a certain evil genius in her shamelessness and her badness. And she knew it.

Confused by myself as well as by her, I babbled something which was as naïve as it was unnecessary. "But I don't like you at all, and besides you would have gone your own way and I mine, if Raymond hadn't run into you by sheer chance and brought you here."

And as though I had just confessed my love to her she pressed me still more tenaciously to her crotch, planted a dainty kiss on my paralysed mouth, and cooed in my ear, "Whoever keeps betting on chance will eventually be successful."

"Hey, what are you two doing there?" Raymond called from behind me, and his obscene, sniffing voice doubled my humiliation. I shook myself free of Ruth Stein when, like a playful kitten, she put one foot on Raymond's chest and he again found himself on the floor.

At that moment the door opened noisily and a tall man burst in wearing painter's overalls. In each hand he carried a bucket of grey-green paint and under his arm he was pulling a ladder, the other end of which dragged along the ground. He looked at us as at disagreeable objects which were in the way and stated firmly, "Going to paint in here!"

For a moment no one was able to speak. The painter paid no attention whatever to us, but put his buckets down, swept Ruth Stein off the table with his ladder, and, looking over us or through us, announced to the air, "Furniture has to be moved into the hall. Otherwise I'll get paint on it."

"Hey, what are you doing? What do you mean, paint? This is my apartment!" Raymond protested quite coherently.

"I don't care, the whole building's going to be painted, and I'm not paid by the hour. Start carrying out chairs!"

It was impossible to argue with this man who was not paid by the hour and was blind to everything but his duty to paint.

"Who sent you to paint here? I have guests here, can't you see?"

"I don't care about that, either. Take this bird-cage

out of here if you don't want it green. Painters are sent by the people who pay them. And you don't look like it was you. I'll start over here in the corner."

Before I knew what was happening he shoved something into my hands and I obediently carried it out. Raymond too, even Ruth Stein, as though bewitched by the decisiveness of this man, tramped in and out of the door carrying various pieces of furniture. Apparently there was nothing else to do. Except perhaps to swear.

"I'm a stupid fool," Miss Stein thought out loud in the middle of her labours. "Why should I work my head off like this? Let that jerk do some of it, he'll sober up faster that way anyway."

"I'm leaving," I said unconvincingly, edging my way from the table to the hallway with two umbrellas, a pair of shoe-trees, and an empty wine bottle.

"Where do you think you'll get without me? I have to wait here for the officials. They'll be here any minute now. You always seem to want to get away from me!"

"Don't go off and leave me in the lurch, do some of the work yourselves. I can hardly walk straight, anyway," Raymond whined, and tried to detach his bookless library from the wall. He was unable to pull it loose, but he did manage to knock some cooking pots and glasses off the shelves.

The man who was not paid by the hour had in the meanwhile used his hands and feet to clear out a corner and had begun to paint carefully. After a few moments, without turning his head from the wall, he advised us, "If you pile up the stuff that's left in the middle of the room I'll throw canvas over it and it'll be all right."

So we began to make a pile in the middle of the room of the stuff that was left, until Ruth Stein again observed aloud that she was working.

"I've had enough of this. What does he think I am, a charwoman, or something?"

But there was nothing to sit down on, since all the chairs were in the hallway.

"Then we can't stay here," I began in another attempt to escape.

"I don't care whether you're here or not," the man who was not paid by the hour announced indifferently. "But all that junk's gotta be in one big pile!"

"I'm not up to this kind of work," Raymond moaned, and worked until the sweat ran off him in little streams. The strain made his voice firmer.

"Take time out, then. None of this stuff's going to be in my way for half an hour," the painter advised.

"Let's all three take a rest. Let's go out in the hall and sit down," Ruth Stein decided. "Damn, I'm hungry! But this idiot has nothing to offer us but trash, fleas, and painters."

"Is it my fault he's got to paint just now? I'd make some coffee if I could. Maybe I can anyway. Hey, you, okay if I turn on the stove? Over there to your right?"

"I don't care."

Raymond went to brew coffee. He was almost able to walk a straight line.

I looked at him uneasily. I would have preferred to see him sleeping; I am afraid of the slow sobering of people who put up with a little too much when they are drunk.

"Miss Stein, I'm going to talk him out of making that coffee."

"Why? Coffee will pep us both up. After all, we were on the town all night together."

The matter-of-fact, stern voice of the painter called from the room, "If you turn the flame on that stove up so high you'll burn something here. But I don't care!"

"Do you hear that?" I warned Ruth Stein again. "Call him back. He'll listen to you."

"You'll feel better if we just sit here together for a while. You're always afraid of something! I don't even know what fear is. Even as a child I didn't know fright. That comes from innocence and the knowledge of impunity, Doctor?"

"What astonishes me most is that you say things as guilelessly as though you really believed them yourself."

"But I'm dead serious. I'm completely innocent, because whatever I do I am allowed to do. In order to be allowed to do so I have chosen the profession I have. And don't think I'm the only one. Lots of my colleagues have joined the service only because they are war veterans and they want to be able to continue to steal *legally*, to kill, or carry on prostitution. Well, that's a subject we can discuss at length when we take our long vacation together in Mexico! There's a field in which you can learn something useful from me—how to do forbidden things legally."

She wanted to pull my body against hers again, but the aquarium came between us. She continued her lesson.

"Look at this money I got from Alfons, for instance." She opened her handbag and took out a bundle of hundred- and fifty-dollar notes. "This money is enchanted! You can't prove that it's yours. And on the other hand no one can prove that it doesn't belong to you. But I have the money now. And since Alfons has made hamburger of himself, and since his note is burned, I can give you the money, but I don't have to. I will give you much more if we go away together. And if you don't do as I say I won't give you anything. Perhaps I'll even testify against you and prove to them that you're crazy and shouldn't be allowed to treat anybody. Of course, this is only theory; practice will be quite different. You will go away with

me and you'll have much more money than you ever dreamed of having."

"Put that money away!"

"Why, does it excite you?"

"No, but it may excite Mr. Raymond uncontrollably. He's a pretty greedy fellow, and as soon as he begins to sober up a little he's going to do anything he can to get a sensational story out of me so that he can get rich."

"We'll be a long way from here by that time!"

"The hell you will!" Raymond called from behind us. "I've been listening to you back here. You're a fine pair, you are!"

"Look, bud——"

"Don't call me bud! This doesn't amuse me any more! And you, Doctor, you're not going to slip out on me. You're going to pay for spending the night here, either in cash or some other way. I'll bring some coffee, and then we can get down to brass tacks."

I stood up because I sensed some new danger.

"Miss Stein, I'm warning you, this won't turn out well. That money doesn't belong to you, and I don't want it. Give it to Mr. Raymond. He really deserves it anyway, because he isn't going to get what he expected from me."

She did not stop smiling even while showing her indignation. This was the first time I had ever seen Miss Stein even slightly angry.

"You really are crazy! Do you think I'd give this money to a stinker like that?"

"Shut your mouth, you lousy whore!" Raymond ~~cried~~ hysterically. He was standing unsteadily in front of us, holding an ancient tin coffee-pot from which steam ~~was~~ rising.

"Mr. Raymond," I began soothingly, "put that ~~coffee~~

pot down and come sit over here with us. I'm sure we can come to an understanding."

"I'm not going to come to any understanding with him! Bring some cups, bud, and pour the coffee," she ordered haughtily.

"Sure, I'll pour you some coffee, you old bitch!"

He spilled hot coffee on her hand. She jumped up, and pressed her hand to her mouth, but she did not cry out. Still armed with the coffee-pot, he stooped down, picked up the handbag, and stuffed it under his arm. Then he spattered coffee on the floor. Not until then did Ruth Stein's face show terror. I knew that expression. That was the way she appeared when she thought that I was dead and then robbed me. And now, as then, she looked about anxiously, as though not Mr. Raymond but someone hidden were threatening her, someone who had secretly told Raymond what to do.

"Give me my handbag!" she cried menacingly, doing her best to overcome the painful coffee burn.

"Sure, but without the money! You heard what the doctor said!"

Ruth Stein, whose face was swollen as soon as she stopped smiling, turned her chair so that it faced Raymond. Then she sat down on it. On the edge, like a beast waiting for its prey. Then she said two icy words, "My handbag!"

Raymond put the leather strap of the handbag in his mouth, held the coffee-pot in his left hand, and searched for the money with his right hand. He took his eyes off Ruth Stein for a single instant, but it was time enough for her to jump up and tip the coffee-pot with her elbow. A hot black torrent poured over Raymond's neck; he howled, the strap fell out of his mouth, and the handbag was once more on the floor.

I bent down and grabbed the money from it. Then I

cried, "Stop or I'll burn this money right before your eyes!"

When I straightened up I could see the distorted face of Mr. Raymond. He looked like a ghost. He hissed and gurgled and grimaced in violent agony. His chin and throat were burned and were stained a dirty brown by the coffee. Ruth Stein was again smiling. She sat down slowly on the chair, preparing at the same time to jump up if need be. Raymond still had the coffee-pot in his hand, and he crept forward with it stealthily like a wounded bird of prey.

"Stop!" I screamed again. And when I saw that they were paying no attention to me I went into the desolate room and looked for the gas stove to burn the money. In my excitement I could not find it so I ran to the open window and called back to the hallway, "Stop it and see what I'm doing to the money you're quarrelling about!"

I threw the money into the wind, piece by piece.

"Get away from that window, I'm going to paint there!" the inhuman voice of the robot with the paint-brush ordered me.

The clatter of struggling feet sounded in the hallway. I threw all the money out of the window and ran back to the hall. Ruth Stein and Frank Raymond were swinging chairs at each other like battle-axes. And Raymond was still holding the coffee-pot in his free hand. Suddenly he threw it in Ruth Stein's face. The hot black liquid flew into her eyes, mouth, and nose, and covered her face. The entire house was filled with animal-like cries.

I ran. Some people caught me on the stairs, shook me, and screamed at me in a language I could not understand, and I think they hit me.

Finally the police came and led me out of the house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I FELT as though I were in a military parade. People in uniform collected round me, and they were serious, sad, and dignified, as though they were to assist at an execution. They asked me nothing but my name, which I repeated again and again, always to someone different, apparently always to someone more important. They led me along avenues of living bodies, back and forth, as though they intended to confuse me so that I would be unable to find my way back; then they whispered something, only to take my arm respectfully or sympathetically (one can never tell which with these people) and lead me a few steps farther and present me to someone else. It seemed to me that they were whispering, "It is he!" and I wondered why I was so popular.

And while I was marching down crooked rows lined with men on both sides, police cars began collecting at the site of my grotesque inspection party. Their arrival was announced with a proud roar of their sirens and a screaming of brakes.

The uniformed men were joined by others in plain clothes, and they apparently discussed what to do with me. Finally two policemen took my arms, one on each side, and said politely, "This car, if you please."

And when they opened the door to the black car they almost seemed to bow.

As soon as I had climbed into the car and settled down, it drove off with me. I looked at the driver sitting next to me and saw—Mr. Prengel. I looked round, but on one else was in the car. We were alone. And then it occurred to me that it would be a nice thing to greet him. So I said, "Good morning, Mr. Prengel!"

But instead of answering he cursed.

We drove slowly along the streets of New York without speaking. Either Mr. Prengel had nothing to say or he was not an experienced driver and did not want to be distracted by talking. His old-fashioned pince-nez were now hanging on the very tip of his nose and threatened to fall off at any moment. The irritable man looked pale, and his breath came with difficulty, as though he were sighing repeatedly or suffering from asthma.

"Mr. Prengel, where are we going? I would very much like to take a bath."

He began to gurgle and grunt.

"Dr. Malik," he burst out, "are you pretending to be crazy or are you really mad? What've you done this time?"

"Mr Prengel, I have already learned from your colleague Ruth Stein, whose face is probably disfigured for life, that you plan to abduct me, have me declared insane, and take away my liberty. I shan't try to stop you. And you can avoid all unnecessary formalities. I would only like to talk with my mother and my former wife before you lock me up."

"Hmm, you'd like that, wouldn't you, to be able to take it easy in an asylum! That would solve everything, wouldn't it! But I wouldn't be so sure it's going to turn out that way!" he cried threateningly, as though he had decided that an insane asylum would be a particularly pleasant place. Then he asked in a more placating tone, "How did you find that newspaper man Raymond? Why didn't you go straight to the police when Kaminsky was shot right under your nose?"

I was enraged, as I always was as soon as I spoke to Prengel.

"Because poor Kaminsky was shot dead not under my

nose but under the nose of the American police and—you'll forgive me, Mr. Prengel—from my close acquaintance with you I have lost all confidence in the intelligence of the American police. The uniformed kind and the secret kind!"

He stepped on the gas and, although we were travelling at considerable speed, he turned his face to me more and more. Finally he said sharply, "You're not crazy, but you have a multiple character, if I may coin a phrase. You come out in various editions, like a newspaper. Now I have sitting next to me the defiant and insolent Dr. Malik. In a while he will change into the humble Dr. Malik, hungering after the stuff dreams are made of. And then he will stand firmly on the ground, or rather in the mud, and crave alcohol, women, and money. You change your skin, like a snake!"

"Why must you shout so, Mr. Prengel? After all, it's none of your business. The trouble is you're always the same, or, if I may also coin a phrase, you're a completely singular character, and you come out in only one edition. There's no conflict in you between being 'earthly' and 'exalted', and for that reason you're such a boring and morose old man. I would very much like to know who you think I am, not in any particular rôle, but now. What do you want of me at this moment, and what have you against me? Mr. Prengel, why must we quarrel when we have nothing to quarrel about?"

He did not look at me, but merely slowed the car, and his flaming eloquence also cooled down.

"When you come down to it, you're quite right. Why should we always be angry with one another? Neither of us has any strength to waste. Where am I taking you? To a conference of Important People. I imagine you know such gentlemen. When they think, they usually scratch

their backsides, and when they give orders, they pick their noses, as though to symbolise the source of their wisdom and their power. Listen, Doctor, collect yourself and tell me what plans you have in case you get out of this business with a whole skin."

"I want to take a bath!"

He half closed his eyes, began coughing, and almost ran through a red light.

"You'll be the death of me, you—you idiot! You have no heart! You have no sympathy for others, or even for yourself."

"Why are you so angry, Mr. Prengel? You should cheer! Your colleague, Miss Stein, told me that you've picked up the whole bunch of them. What more do you want?"

"If you call that beast a colleague of mine once more, something unpleasant is going to happen. I hope she will spend at least a little time behind bars for today's outburst. As far as her burns are concerned, you've exaggerated again. They aren't too serious and in time they'll disappear. Call it an act of God! What got into you, throwing money around in the street like that? And whose money was it, anyway?"

"The money was from Alfons. Ruth Stein stole it from me. Then she fought over it with the newspaper man Raymond and I threw it out of the window. This is still a free country as far as I know, and I can spend my money any way I like!"

"But you can't disturb the peace or cause a riot, and so on. Do you know what happened beneath that window when money started raining down on the street? You're not interested, are you?"

"Lord, no! Mr. Prengel, why must I end up in an insane asylum? Am I really such a dangerous witness?"

"I've already told you that you can't count on that

asylum. And as a witness you aren't worth beans. Only you're a gigantic fool. The Howard-Alfons case is closed. In the interest of public peace and order this case must be explained in a way the public will understand. In other words, both men were working for the Soviets, both wanted to overthrow the American Government and create confusion, sabotage, and panic throughout the country. But by the intervention of the American counter-espionage service they were discovered and all their riff-raff with them. I very much doubt that anyone would get such a simple and comprehensible explanation of this affair from you. And for that very reason your neurotic testimony would help nothing now, on the eve of the Presidential elections."

"Mr Prengel, I'm astonished. So far I've considered you an honourable man in spite of everything. But you know better than I that what you have just said about Howard and Alfons is not true!"

"Of course I know it!" he cried, and grew red in the face. "But I know only what isn't true. I don't know the real truth, nor do you, so shut up and don't bother me!"

Indeed, there was nothing more to say. I looked out of the window and received the impression that Mr. Prengel was taking me round in a wide circle over the same streets. Apparently he still had something on his mind, but was having difficulty beginning. I decided to help him.

"Look here, Mr. Prengel, we're watching each other out of the corners of our eyes, and we're each about to decide that the Lord should take pity on both of us. We are beaten, hounded, poisoned, excitable, and no one understands us. Why not encourage each other and try to help each other? In spite of a difference in our characters we can surely get along if we forget our embarrassment and

tell each other what we want. I'll begin. Thanks to those listening devices you use, you know about my wife, who is in New York now. At present my only plan and my only wish is to see her.

He apparently liked what I had said, for he stopped grumbling. But he reacted evasively.

"Another improvisation! No miracle is going to result from such a meeting. But that's your business. What I want is for you to fade slowly out of the picture. No heroics. Only in that way will you be deserving of humanity and of yourself."

"Excellent! Can you help me to do so?"

"That depends more on you than on me. Under certain circumstances I am willing to try to convince my superiors that throughout the entire affair you were merely the fifth wheel on the cart. When they're interviewing you, just give your tongue a rest. I have no more advice to give you. And now find that letter you got from Alfons and translate it for me."

"Mr. Prengel, Ruth Stein burned that letter. When you ran out of my office as though the place was on fire you completely forgot about Alfons's letter. I didn't get a chance to read it thoroughly until after you had left, and I was so stunned by it that it fell from my hand. It lay on the floor for several hours. Of course, it's inexcusable for you. Even your detectives failed to notice it later."

"Of course they would with that mess on your floor!" he exploded. "Well, summarise it for me. That only happened so you could scold me some more. What was in Alfons's letter and why did that fat little saint burn it?"

"There were two things in that letter, one important, and the other less so. Alfons told me that he was not dying for a great idea, but rather so that a great idea should not be carried out. And then he wrote that he had

left three thousand dollars for me in the medicine chest where he found the poisons. You're not the only one who can find Czech translators; Ruth Stein had the letter deciphered for her, and then took the money out of the medicine cabinet. She said she had the assistance of a large gathering of your detectives who were afflicted with blindness."

Mr. Prengel stopped the car, but he did not get out. He cleaned his glasses with his handkerchief, and I tried in vain to decide whether he was perplexed, irritated, or formulating some plan. Suddenly he put his pince-nez back on his nose and asked abruptly, "Do you have any theories about this great idea?"

"Ah, now we're at the core of the matter! I have."

"If you please, skip the comments and tell me your theory."

"They wanted to cause a catastrophe; America was to resemble an ant-heap which someone had kicked over. This catastrophe was to create a general panic, terror, and public disturbance, and it was to be planned and carried out in such a way that it would appear to be the result of experiments with new secret weapons. All of this was to happen in the interest of world peace. That's my theory. And it's not very different from yours."

Mr. Prengel took his hands off the wheel, folded them in his lap, and turned his pallid face towards me. In this position his nose looked still longer and more pointed. He looked like a bantam rooster who had just lost a fight. He gasped for air. "Have you confided this idea to anyone?"

"Only to Mr. Kaminsky. Just before they murdered him."

He breathed deeply, looked through the windscreen nervously, and stepped indecisively on the accelerator. Then he said, reproaching himself, "It's possible that I put this

nonsense into your head when I analysed my theory about Howard."

"Don't worry, you weren't the only one. But tell me, if it isn't a state secret, will you ever know for certain just what Alfons was supposed to do?"

"Yes, if he is identified. And only you can identify him, because only you saw him without glasses. We're on our way to the Important Persons who will show you several photographs. If you recognise Alfons in one of them, we will know very soon what his mission was."

"Mr. Prengel, you'd like to——"

"Quiet," he shot at me. "I'm not urging you to do anything!"

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Yes, I do. Give me a cigarette, I'm upset again."

"Unfortunately, I have none. Mr. Prengel, you won't be angry if I ask a very impertinent question? Why, for God's sake, did you choose this revolting profession?"

He did not answer. The car was moving again, although very slowly. We could not have gone faster, because Mr. Prengel's eyes were half-closed, as though he were trying to fall asleep, and his head was tilted nostalgically. I imagine he was completely exhausted. Then, when I least expected it, he began to answer my question. I sat up and turned towards him at his first words, so that I could be certain it was really he speaking. He sounded completely different. Sad, disarmed, and somewhat ecstatic.

"Why shouldn't I tell you, when we have already found out so much about each other? Your world collapsed after you left your wife. And mine, as you know, even if you won't believe it, tumbled about me when my daughter went mad after her husband left her, and I spent days and nights with a mad woman and a child. Then they took her away and I had only the child left. I'm a religious

man and I prayed a great deal. And suddenly I understood how God suffers since He gave us, irrevocably, free will, and how it pains Him when he hears only the babbling of children and the chattering of idiots. And so in compassion for God I sought to help people, in the very focus of their dangerous dramas."

I stared at him more in astonishment than with emotion.

"Then you don't find people disgusting?"

"People torment me and provoke me, and my own sorrow for them disgusts me. I don't know whether you understand me."

"Not very well, Mr. Prengel. How can you possibly help anyone, doing what you do? After all, in your service, whether you want to or not, you must automatically separate people into friends and enemies. Is such a division just?"

"I don't split up today's people into two groups at all. We all tumbled out of the same box, no matter what political system we now live under. We are all still, without distinction, the children of a single epoch. All political evils come from within us and therefore we cannot align ourselves properly against them. It is clear to me that our friends and our enemies *belong to each other*, because they beget each other; they cannot exist without each other in the forms they have chosen, and one cannot explain his own actions without the other. There is but one world, one society, one force of self-destruction and self-preservation, but there are many mad ideas. Among these mad ideas I include the opinion that one half of the world may save the other by taking possession of it. Salvation cannot come from one side of the world or the other, but only from above. But it will come! For me, for you, for my daughter, for my grandson, for your mother and your wife. We may be saved only within ourselves and not outside ourselves.

But we will be saved! There would be no suffering if there were no salvation, just as there would be no tears if there were no laughter. There will be reconciliation among men when there is reconciliation with God."

"But why, with these opinions——"

"Why?" he interrupted my sentence unexpectedly and rudely. "Perhaps for your sake! Well, that's enough. We're there!"

He stopped, opened the door, and jumped out nimbly. He avoided looking at me, and when I was able to look into his eyes, I thought they were wet.

We were standing in front of the entrance to a ghostly alloy of glass and masonry. It was one of those New York skyscrapers so boastfully tall and coldly elevated that it seemed to have been built by blasphemers and renegades. It stood lifeless on the lively avenue, and round it streamed throbbing crowds whose beginning and end were swallowed up by other crowds. My heart contracted. I had the feeling that I was a small boy, and that my father was taking me to an evil doctor who would pull out my tooth.

"Let's go, it's on the ninth floor," Mr. Prengel invited me impatiently.

"Just a moment, my head is spinning. I'd like to ask you where we are, if that question is not completely out of order."

"On Fifth Avenue, and don't just stand there gaping! We're late as it is. I promised them yesterday that I would find you and bring you here by ten-thirty this morning at the latest. And now it's after eleven. Why are you looking at me as though you had never seen me before?"

"It's not that, it's as though I shall never see you again. Let's go, Mr. Prengel!"

We entered an elevator which was operated by a bulky, frowning negro. Under the touch of his fingers the doors

closed, and the motion of the elevator was perceptible only by the pressure in my ears. Again, as in an evil fairy tale, the doors opened by themselves and we went out into an empty hallway lined with an endless row of numbered glass doors. Mr. Prengel stopped at Number 999, and in fear and hope I told myself childishly that three nines could mean good luck.

Without knocking or ringing we entered a small office which contained several benches and a single black table. The white walls were bare of pictures, the floor had no rug, and the table was without typewriter, paper, or pencils. And round the empty table sat the men whom Mr. Prengel called Important Persons. There were three. They wore identical shirts and identical neckties; one was tall, the second fat, and the third stooped. Their faces were empty, as though illness had rubbed all the life from them. They resembled an endless crowd of people precisely because they lacked expression. But in one respect Mr. Prengel had exaggerated: none of them, and I noted this well, scratched his backside or picked his nose. With one voice they greeted Mr. Prengel, who only growled.

"Dr. Malik?" Fat asked without interest.

"Sit down," said Tall.

And Stooper drew up a chair for me. Mr. Prengel did not sit down. Nor did the others invite him to do so. He stood beside me, and the three sat opposite me.

"You already know," began Tall almost humorously, "that we know!"

And by contrast with Tall, Fat continued severely, "That we know all about you! That makes the procedure easier. Dr. Malik, do you consider yourself a mentally healthy person?"

They did not answer reliably. Each of us, including you, gentlemen, suffers from what I could call, unprofessionally,

a minor insanity. Only you, thanks to your listening devices and your authority, can prove my minor insanity, whereas I cannot do the same for you."

"Our medical department," began Stooper in a voice to which he added a measure of friendliness, "after careful study of your proposal, which so inspired Colonel Howard, is denying you the right to continue your psychiatric practice."

"That does not surprise me, in spite of the fact that my proposal has nothing to do with my medical practice. That plan was worked out by Arnost Malik, not by Doctor of Medicine Arnost Malik. That proposal concerned the problem of inoculating healthy people with madness, and not how to restore sick patients to health. My proposal was political, not medical. And politics, under the best of circumstances, treats, but it does not cure."

Behind me Mr. Prengel's wheezing and grunting could be heard, followed by several angry sentences. "On the way over, Dr. Malik confided to me that he was planning to give up psychiatry anyway. He has decided to leave New York and to take a position as assistant to a general practitioner in one of the Southern states where there is such a disastrous shortage of all medical personnel since the recent floods and hurricanes"

I turned and looked at him in surprise. He looked squarely into my face. And in an instant he winked his left eye.

I said nothing. Tall broke the brief silence. He was fond of a jesting tone of voice, so that I did not know whether he was joking or speaking seriously.

"In your opinion is Communism merely a psychological matter?"

"In my opinion all types of megalomania originate as psychological matters, whether Communist, Fascist or

democratic. Only in practice does megalomania become a political matter."

"And what, in your opinion, is democratic megalomania?" Fat asked in a bored tone.

"For example, the theory that technical progress and quantities of money can improve the world and make humanity happy and good."

"Hmmm, hmm," mumbled the three at the table, and Mr. Prengel grunted behind me. Apparently what I had said would do me no good.

"If a journalist should seek you out and ask you for a story of the events surrounding Howard and Alfons, would you give him that story?"

"Such a case has already occurred. I spent last night in the apartment of a newspaper man named Raymond. He heard on the radio that I was a witness of some political events, and he begged me to tell him about them. I tried to oblige him, but it was impossible! What I told him made no sense to him. I promise you solemnly that I shall not repeat this experience. I shall tell no one anything about what I have seen, heard, or experienced. Nor can I, because I am unable to reduce these events to a common denominator, which would be necessary to make them comprehensible. Mr. Prengel told the truth. I shall leave New York and treat ill and wounded bodies instead of ill and wounded souls. And now, gentlemen, I should very much like to take a bath."

The three Important Persons began to whisper among themselves. Their overcast faces testified to no good. Finally Tall, the joker, spoke.

"In your opinion you have no claims against the Psychological Warfare Institute, your remarkable and involuntary collaboration with us is completed. We wish you the best of luck, Dr. Malik!"

They stood up. I was unwilling to believe my own ears.

"You mean . . . I . . . I can . . . leave?"

"Yes, you can go home to your mother and take a bath," Mr. Prengel growled derisively at me.

"One moment." Stooper dashed my hopes. And, moving like a thief, he brought a folder of photographs up from somewhere beneath the table. "Take a look at these pictures and tell us which one is Alfons."

He was in the first one. Smiling, self-assured, ironic, somewhat younger than I remembered him. And he was wearing an aviation uniform. I looked at him for a long time and felt a twinge of pain in my heart.

"What's the matter? Why are you looking at that one so hard? Could that be Alfons?" demanded Fat, who had until now been so blasé. Mr. Prengel groaned behind me at that moment.

I answered firmly, "No, that's not he, but I wonder what kind of uniform that is. It's not American, is it?"

"Hell!" thundered Mr. Prengel. "Look for Alfons and don't worry about the uniform."

"Don't frighten him!" Tall, the joker, reminded Mr. Prengel.

The other photographs showed completely unknown men. I spread the pictures out on the table like a pack of cards and said softly, "I'm sorry, but none of these people is Alfons!"

The three Important Persons sighed and sat down again.

"Thank you," Fat said.

"Good-bye," said Tall.

"Good luck," Stooper wished me.

I walked towards the door, waiting to hear what Mr. Prengel would say in parting. He said nothing. I turned round towards him. His back was turned to me and he was looking at the ceiling.

"Good-bye, Mr. Prengel!"

My voice broke.

"Good-bye," he growled unpleasantly. He was standing motionless, like a statue, his head turned upward, his arms behind him, and his hands clenched painfully.

I opened the door softly and walked out. Not a soul was in the hall. Behind one of the numbered doors a young feminine voice was singing. I think it was a love song.



